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**“Quality is Everything”: Rhetoric of the Transatlantic
Birth Control Movement in Interwar Women’s Literature
of England, Ireland and the United States**

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by

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This dissertation suggests that burgeoning public discourse on contraception in Britain and the United States between 1915 and 1940 created a paradigm shift in perceptions of women’s sexuality that altered the ways that women could be represented in literary texts. It offers readings of texts by women on both sides of the Atlantic who responded to birth control discourse not only by referencing contraceptive techniques, but also by incorporating arguments and dilemmas used by birth control advocates into their writing. The introductory chapter, which frames the later literary analysis chapters, examines similarities in the tropes Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes, the British and American “Mothers of Birth Control” used in their advocacy. These include images such as mothers dying in childbirth, younger children in large families weakened by their mothers’ ill-health, and sexual dysfunction in traditional marriages.

In addition to this chapter on birth control advocates’ texts, the dissertation includes four chapters meant to demonstrate how literary authors used and adapted the tropes and language of the birth control movement to their own narratives and perspectives. The first of these chapters focuses on Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*,

a 1915 political allegory about a nation populated only by women who have gained the ability to reproduce asexually. Gilman adopted pro-birth control language, but rejected the politically radical ideas of the early birth control movement. In addition to radical politics, the birth control movement was associated with racist eugenicist ideas, an association that the third chapter, on Nella Larsen's 1928 novel *Quicksand* examines in detail by comparing birth control and African-American racial uplift rhetoric. Crossing the Atlantic, the fourth chapter looks at the influence of the English birth control movement on Irish novelist Kate O'Brien's 1931 *Without My Cloak*, a novel that challenges Catholic narratives as well as the heteronormative assumptions of birth control discourse itself. The final chapter analyzes Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *Three Guineas* (1938), illuminating Woolf's connections between feminist reproductive politics and conservative pro-eugenics agendas.

Acknowledging the complexity of these writers' engagements with the birth control movement, the project explores not simply the effects of the movement's discourse on writers' depictions of sexuality, reproduction, and race, but also the dialogue between literary writers and the birth control establishment, which comprises a previously overlooked part of the formation of both the reproductive rights movement and the Modernist political project.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Contraception as Ideology and Technology.....	1
Chapter One: “Setting Motherhood Free”: Rhetoric and Ideology in Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger.....	19
Chapter Two: The Future of Sex: <i>The Woman Rebel</i> in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s <i>Herland</i> Saga.....	60
Chapter Three: “That Means Children to Me”: The Birth Control Movement in Nella Larsen’s <i>Quicksand</i>	110
Chapter Four: Passion’s Possibilities: Desire and the Birth Control Movement in Kate O’Brien’s <i>Without My Cloak</i>	154
Chapter Five: Doctors, Veterans, and Prostitutes: Fertility Control in Virginia Woolf’s Feminist Narratives.....	198
Conclusion: Birth Control and Twentieth Century Narratives of “ <i>The Erotic</i> ”.....	247
Works Cited.....	257
VITA.....	269

Introduction

Contraception as Ideology and Technology

A recent television commercial for NuvaRing, the contraceptive vaginal insert, uses images of exhausted synchronized swimmers wearing bathing suits labeled with days of the week to contrast the ease of a once-a-month insertion with the drudgery of taking the pill every day. One by one, the swimmers step out of formation, take off their swim caps and one piece suits, and go sit in the hot tub in bikinis, enjoying the carefree life available to women who aren't slaves to their daily birth control pill (Bosch). The advertisement's message that the birth control pill places an undue burden on women trying to control their fertility highlights the rapid progress of contraceptive research and technology since the first birth control pills were made publicly available in 1960. Birth control remains, however, not only a practical but also an ideological issue for women of childbearing age and the apparently innumerable public figures—politicians, religious figures, insurance companies, pharmacists, media spokespeople, social workers—who believe they have a stake in those women's family planning choices. As public debates over "freedom of choice" for pharmacists, over-the-counter birth control pills, and contraception distribution at high schools and colleges demonstrates, birth control is not just a technology, but also a discourse. In the ad described above, for example, we find not only the obvious argument that contraception is best when it is least intrusive in women's lives, but the somewhat conflicting argument that women are solely responsible for fertility control in heterosexual relationships, and the profit-motivated argument that women are better off paying more for new technologies like NuvaRing (which has not

been released under a generic label) than sticking with their “onerous,” but cheap, off-label birth control pills.

It was Margaret Sanger who invented the term “birth control” in 1914 and coalesced disparate movements related to population control, feminism, and poverty alleviation into a unified political agenda aimed at providing access to contraception to all American women. In the first issue of the *Birth Control Review*, the second pro-birth control periodical she founded, Sanger wrote,

Against the State, against the Church, against the silence of the medical profession, against the whole machinery of dead institutions of the past, the woman of today arises. She no longer pleads. She no longer implores. ... She is here to assert herself.... If she must break the law to establish her right to voluntary motherhood, then the law shall be broken. (Sanger “Shall We” 4)

Sanger’s suggestion that women not only inconvenience themselves, but also break the law for the sake of contraception, reveals both the drastic difference and the similar underlying assumptions between her rhetoric and that of the NuvaRing advertisers and similar proponents of contraceptives today. Both Sanger and the ad share the claim that their agenda represents a New Day for womenkind: Sanger will free women from the chains of “involuntary” motherhood, and the NuvaRing will release them from the drudgery of the pill. While we can dismiss the ad’s claims as effective but obviously exaggerated, what about Sanger’s idea that through her movement “the woman of today arises,” throwing off old ideas not only about access to contraceptive tools, but also about

the role of doctors in women's reproductive lives, the Church's regulation of family planning and sexuality, and the state's right to censor information related to women's health?

In this dissertation I work from the assumption that the birth control movement of the 1910s did usher in a new era, if not immediately in terms of technological progress or universal access to contraception, at least in terms of creating and shaping a public discourse of family planning which had wide resonance in the politics, culture, and literature of the early twentieth century. In particular, I argue that the work of Sanger and her colleagues led to increased opportunities and a more explicit public language for women writers' critical engagement with the connection between women's sexuality and motherhood in their work, a phenomenon neglected by literary and cultural studies scholars. I will identify the elements of the discourse of the birth control movement in Great Britain and America that gave that movement wide recognition and eventually moral force as a mainstream political agenda. I will then demonstrate how those same elements function in prose texts written between 1915 and 1938 by women authors in Britain, Ireland, and America, texts that engage with the discourse of the birth control movement even though they rarely explicitly mention Sanger or the contraceptive techniques she and her colleagues promoted.

American feminist scholarship and activism has focused on Margaret Sanger as the "Mother of Birth Control," usually acknowledging Emma Goldman and Mary Ware Dennet as her most significant contemporaries. A more relevant parallel figure to Sanger, however, is the British writer Marie Stopes, who published best-selling sex and

contraception manuals and opened the first birth control clinics in Great Britain at the same time as Sanger was popularizing the American movement. Stopes' 1918 book, *Married Love*, arose out of her experience with her first husband, whose impotence the virginal Stopes claims she was unable to recognize after several years of marriage.¹ Though Stopes and Sanger are not often studied alongside one another, the similarities between their versions of birth control advocacy are striking. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I will examine the rhetorical connections between these two towering figures in the history of contraception, arguing that between them they created a trans-Atlantic movement that ultimately advocated not only freer access to contraception, but also more powerful roles for women in public and private arenas as well as new ways of understanding and controlling race and nationhood in the United States and Great Britain. I will then analyze the adoption and adaptation of birth control movement² discourse by four authors writing on both sides of the Atlantic between 1915 and 1938: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Nella Larsen, Kate O'Brien, and Virginia Woolf.

¹ Though Stopes' version of her marriage stands as the accepted mythology—she did receive an annulment from Reginald Ruggles Gates on the grounds of non-consummation—there is some doubt that she was as sexually ignorant as she presents herself, particularly as she apparently gave advice on contraception and abortion through the mail long before her supposed awakening and court proceedings (Rose 77-8).

² Though I sometimes use “birth control” and “contraception” interchangeably in this project, I have attempted to distinguish between contraception as any process or technology used to prevent conception, and birth control as a term specific to the discourse about and practice of contraception after Sanger's conscious use of the term as the name for her movement. “Family planning” I use less often to refer to the pre-considered spacing and delay of births advocated by Sanger and Stopes, and all of these terms should be distinguished sharply from abortion, which Sanger (after 1916) and Stopes vehemently opposed and of which they considered birth control a preventative.

The widespread influence of Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes on American and British society can be demonstrated both by the popularity of their written texts and the variety of contexts in which they or their work gained recognition in popular and intellectual culture. While previous social movements, including Neo-Malthusianism, which raised awareness of the economic and social problems of population growth, and Voluntary Motherhood, which advocated against marital rape and in favor of women's right to "space" their children by refusing intercourse, Stopes and Sanger's work brought a discussion of the personal and social benefits of "artificial" contraceptives to ordinary English and American women.

A radical leftist in her early career, Sanger reached international fame after her run-ins with the American Comstock Laws regarding her writing about contraceptive techniques. In 1913 she wrote a column for the socialist newsletter *The Call* entitled "What Every Girl Should Know." After the column was censored, *The Call* ran a blank page to call attention to its missing content, with the heading "What Every Girl Should Know—Nothing; By Order of the U.S. Post Office"; pressure by *The Call* and its readers following the incident prompted the post office to allow the column to run a few weeks later (Chesler 66). Sanger's arrest in 1914 on charges that her magazine *The Woman Rebel* contained obscene material and her subsequent flight to Europe to avoid trial led to support beyond socialist circles, as mainstream publications like *The New Republic*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *The New York Times* took up her cause and also printed arguments in favor of wider access to contraception. (129-30). Her fame during this period marked the beginning of her long career as a speaker, writer, founder of *The Birth Control*

Review, the American Birth Control League, and Planned Parenthood, and political lobbyist at large for issues related to contraception. Sanger's first book, *Woman and the New Race*, published in 1920 by Brentano's in New York, went through several editions almost right away (Chesler 194). Her second book, *Pivot of Civilization*, which focused more explicitly on eugenics and birth control in public policy, was also published in 1920 by Brentano's. Sanger's books created controversy, but also garnered positive reviews from important political and academic allies, including British sexologist Havelock Ellis and the editors of *The New Republic* (197). Sanger sold 567,000 copies of *Woman and Pivot* between 1920 and 1926 (198), while thousands subscribed to her *Birth Control Review* and tens of thousands of copies of her *Family Limitation* pamphlet, in several languages, were printed and distributed (167-8).

Like Sanger, Marie Stopes became associated with the birth control movement not only as an individual, but also as a symbol. The publication of her bestseller *Married Love* in 1918 sparked political and religious controversy, ignited medical inquiry into the validity of her advice, and even inspired popular doggerel like the following:

Jeanie, Jeanie, full of hopes,
Read a book by Marie Stopes,
Now to judge by her condition
She must have read the wrong edition. (Chesler 182)

When Sanger met Stopes in England in 1915, Stopes had already written the manuscript for *Married Love*, a sex advice manual for married couples that included a chapter on contraception, and was looking for a publisher. The book was finally published in 1918

by A.C. Fifield in London, after Stopes' (future) second husband, Humphrey Roe, put up £500 to assist with the printing expenses. Despite the difficulty Stopes had finding a publisher, the book sold 2000 copies in its first 2 weeks and went through six editions in its first year (Hall 135). Stopes continued writing prolifically on sex and contraception; her 1918 pamphlet *Wise Parenthood*, a prescriptive guide to selected contraceptive techniques, was very unpopular in the medical and religious establishment, but a commercial success (Hall 149-50). Later books like *Radiant Motherhood* (1920), *Enduring Passion* (1926), and *Sex and the Young* (1927) continued the themes—women's sexual pleasure, the importance of birth spacing to healthy marriages and children, and the eugenic importance of birth control—that Stopes began exploring in *Married Love*. Her influence was long-lived as well as widespread: in 1935, a group of American scholars voted *Married Love* the sixteenth most important book published since 1885, ahead of works by Einstein, Freud, and Keynes (Hall 128). Like Sanger, Stopes made a career on her association with the politics of contraception, and though historians acknowledge a variety of other activists working alongside these two women, it was their names and voices that permeated public discourse on the methods, ethics, and politics of contraception.

If these women's writings infiltrated medicine, politics, religion, and popular culture, what was their effect on literary culture? How did writers, particularly women writers, respond to the shift in public discourse on women's reproductive lives? Despite the huge number of literary narratives, from *The Scarlet Letter* to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* to *The Sound and the Fury*, that pivot around unplanned pregnancies,

literary criticism has typically failed to analyze representations of pregnancy prevention or attempts at contraception. In looking at women's writing immediately following the popularization of Sanger and Stopes's work, we have an opportunity to undertake such an investigation in a historical period (not unlike the early twenty-first century) saturated with discussions of the ethics, effectiveness, and political valence of contraception. In addition, the censorship of information about birth control in the United States and Ireland during this time period makes its representation in those nations' literatures (and particularly in literature written by women) fraught with both the complexity of representing reproduction and the necessity of representing it in such a way as not to invite criticism and suppression.

Some literary scholarship, however, has considered the influence of birth control politics on women writers in the twentieth century, using Sanger's or Stopes's work as a lens. Beth Widmeier Capo's 2007 book *Textual Contraception* compares the narratives used by birth control advocates in the United States with the work of contemporary belletristic writers, while Christine Hauck focuses on Marie Stopes's influence on Virginia Woolf and other British Modernists. Capo calls for greater attention to representations of contraception: "What is missing from current scholarship is an investigation of deliberate attempts to avoid such a state [pregnancy], of woman-with-womb but not woman-as-womb" (9). What these writers effectively point out is the gap in contemporary literary criticism regarding birth control; the contraceptive measures that are so commonplace to twenty-first century scholars as to be invisible to many of us were actually both highly politicized and personally preoccupying to women in the early

twentieth century. In this dissertation I hope to go further in my analyses of individual authors' responses to birth control discourse. While Capo has emphasized the point that narratives about birth control "infiltrate texts through the many issues that tied the birth control movement to other social concerns: economics, eugenics, women's roles, the falling birth rate, and America's place in the international sphere" (Capo 8), I will show how women authors who were conversant with such social concerns not only adopted, but also manipulated, adapted, and critiqued birth control discourse to support their own agendas and create their own identities.

In addition to work by Capo, Hauck, and historians who focus on the birth control movement³, I also draw on literary criticism of interwar and Modernist literature that discusses the interplay between literary texts and the rapidly changing historical and social contexts of the period. Particularly important have been Daylanne K. English's *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, and Marouf Arif Hasian Jr.'s *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought*. I am particularly struck by English's insistence that although interwar literature often reflected dominant trends in social and political thought, particularly regarding race relations and the authority of progress-oriented eugenics narratives, "literature ... offered significant complications of, and at times the sole challenges to, the period's dominant social and

³ These include Andrea Tone (*Devices and Desires*, 2001), Angus McLaren (*A History of Contraception*, 1990), Carole R. McCann (*Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1944*, 1994), Linda Gordon (*The Moral Property of Women*, 2002), Dorothy Roberts (*Killing the Black Body*, 1997), Jessie Rodrique ("The Black Community and the Birth-Control Movement," 1990), and biographers of Stopes and Sanger including David Kennedy, Ellen Chesler, June Rose, and Ruth Hall.

scientific project of bio-national improvement” (20). Following her model, I examine not only the ways in which women writers use images and ideas from Stopes and Sanger, but also ways in which they turn those ideas on their heads, offering alternative perspectives and sometimes direct challenges to the birth control movement’s depictions of fertility control.

In approaching the role of the birth control movement in twentieth century literature from a trans-atlantic perspective, I hope to shed new light on two aspects of the movement’s complex politics. First, comparing the work of Stopes and Sanger themselves and observing their parallel interventions into the discourse of reproduction and sexual fulfillment offers an appropriate context for studying a movement whose founders themselves considered it trans-national. The birth control movement, like contemporaneous political organizations in socialism, pacifism, and racial equality, was cosmopolitan and internationalist in nature, with principal actors in Europe and the US visiting one another, corresponding, and contributing to the same publications. By taking into consideration these intellectual exchanges, this dissertation attempts to elucidate the social history of the birth control movement in terms of the shared culture from which Stopes and Sanger arose and their shared vision for their work and the post-contraceptive future. The ideological solidarity between these two figures has been under-examined, but it essential to an understanding of both the movement itself and its long-term role in Western culture.

Second, and more significantly, the trans-cultural perspective I use here highlights the importance of race and nationality in birth control discourse. While Stopes and

Sanger's intellectual coherence created connections between American and English birth control advocates, their work insisted upon national and ethnic hierarchies that emphasized the different value birth control rhetoric placed on different groups of women. When I began research for this project, I was initially struck by the ways in which women of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds wrote about reproduction in similar ways during this period. I noted frequent references to needless loss of women's lives in pregnancy, to smaller families as ideal, and to the genetic quality of children and families, which appeared in seemingly disparate texts. The first chapter of the dissertation will explore these similarities. However, my analyses of literature during this period eventually focused more on the differences between writers' experiences of and reactions to the discourse on contraception. Using the same images to evoke different perspectives on contraception, my authors critique Stopes and Sanger's movement as much as they adopt its language, undermine its assumptions even as they promote some of its goals. These differences, I came to see, are tied to the ways in which birth control discourse created not only new identities and opportunities for women, but new hierarchies (or at least new justifications for old hierarchies) centered upon race, class, and sexual orientation. White, straight, middle-class actors in Britain and the US used birth control discourse to ally themselves against the lower classes, non-whites, and gays and lesbians. In turn, those marginalized groups created rhetorical space for themselves in the formulations of sexuality and motherhood invoked by that discourse, raising issues that continue to play a role in feminist debates concerning fertility, contraception, and abortion. Because of this complex interplay among ideological and cultural identities that

characterized the birth control movement, a trans-Atlantic, trans-cultural survey that analyzes writers who were either privileged or marginalized by this discourse is needed to provide a thorough understanding of the ways in which birth control discourse permeated literary and popular culture.

The first chapter of this dissertation, “‘Talk About Replenishing the Earth’: The Rhetoric of Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes,” establishes my claim that Stopes and Sanger’s movement represented a trans-national paradigm shift in representations of fertility, sex, and motherhood. Because my argument relies on the idea that an understanding of birth control movement discourse renders its appearances legible in literary works, despite the paucity of explicit references to contraception, this first chapter will explicate this discourse itself, revealing the shared preoccupations and value systems of Stopes’s and Sanger’s writing. Birth control movement writing was inherently persuasive, as Stopes and Sanger both wrote intending not only to inform their readers about their contraceptive options but also to overcome social and legal barriers to contraception access and to gain financial and ideological support for their organizations and clinics. Therefore, an analysis of both the content and the persuasive techniques of birth control movement writing is essential to an understanding of how these authors’ ideas “infiltrated” early twentieth century literature. In Chapter One, I undertake such an analysis using theory from ideological rhetorical criticism and discourse studies, particularly the work of Michael Calvin McGee and Chaim Perelman.

In this chapter, I highlight common tropes, such as mothers dying in childbirth, younger children in large families weakened by their mothers’ ill-health, and sexual

dysfunction in traditional marriages, that carry ideological weight specifically connected to Stopes and Sanger's goals for their movement, such as women's control over their fertility, "racial betterment" through eugenic sexual selection, and increased sexual pleasure for (heterosexual, married) women. I also note moments in these writers' texts in which they draw distinctions between groups—men and women, natives and immigrants, "fit" and "non-fit" parents—in order to appeal to their audience's sense of superiority to the "negative term" of the pair and their sense of identification with the "positive term," associated with Sanger and Stopes's reproductive or sexual ideals. Explicating the landscape of birth control discourse from the perspective of rhetorical analysis offers a foundation for my chapters of literary analysis, which build on the understanding that Stopes and Sanger brought a series of birth-control-related tropes and points of personal and cultural identification into the public sphere, giving women writers new language and new characterizations of sex, wifehood, and motherhood with which to construct their narratives.

The second chapter, entitled "The Future of Sex: *The Woman Rebel* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*," focuses on Gilman's 1915 political allegory about a nation populated only by women, who have gained the ability to reproduce asexually. In this chapter, I expand my characterization of birth control discourse to show how other social movements, specifically mainstream feminism and the eugenics movement, affected the construction of the birth control movement's ideological substance. I use a comparison between *Herland*, published in Gilman's magazine *The Forerunner*, and articles in Sanger's first magazine, *The Woman Rebel*, to show how Gilman directly challenged the

radical, pro-sex implications of the socialist *Woman Rebel* and instead proposed an alternative ethics of contraception that foregoes an emphasis on sexual pleasure in favor of community responsibility in the bearing and raising of children. In the second part of the chapter, I complicate that argument by showing how Gilman's focus on marriage and motherhood as ideals in *Herland* and her eugenic agenda in its sequel, *With Her in Ourland*, offered an alternative political identity for the birth control movement that Sanger eventually adopted in her later periodical *The Birth Control Review*. I note that although Sanger's movement began as a class-transgressing, radical challenge to mainstream feminism, it was through adopting tropes of what she once labeled Gilman's "harmless" politics that she gained access to a platform large enough to promulgate her message. The compromises that message underwent during Sanger's shift from working class radical to middle-class reformer became the legacy of reproductive rights discourse in the twentieth century, and are a major source of the racial and class issues that dominate my textual analyses in this dissertation.

In my third chapter, "'That Means Children to Me': *The Birth Control Review* in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," I show how Larsen both uses and challenges the rhetoric of white birth control activists, complicating previous analyses of Larsen's 1928 novel that emphasize her critique of W.E.B. DuBois's "talented tenth" discourse. The final scenes of *Quicksand* depict Larsen's "tragic mulatta" heroine Helga Crane weakened by four pregnancies and apparently defeated by her transformation from middle-class social climber in Harlem to preacher's wife in Alabama. Scholars have explicated Larsen's engagement with "racial uplift," but have struggled to integrate a logical explication of

Quicksand's tragic ending with a consideration of Larsen's critique of DuBois and racial uplift politics. By comparing Larsen's depiction of Helga's downfall with writings about over-fertile women in the *Birth Control Review*, I demonstrate that *Quicksand* challenges the class myopia of both African-American racial uplift and the white-dominated birth control movement. Larsen's depiction of the intelligent, artistic Helga at the mercy of both dehumanizing material conditions and the personality-erasing assumptions that dominate birth control advocates' representations of poor, over-fertile African-American mothers sheds light on the interrelationship between poverty and institutional racism.

The fourth chapter, "Passion's Possibilities: Desire and the Birth Control Movement in Kate O'Brien's *Without My Cloak*," moves across the Atlantic, but continues to analyze the racial and sexual hierarchies created by birth control movement discourse. Though O'Brien set her novels among the Irish-Catholic bourgeoisie, her residence in England in the years following the publication of Stopes' bestselling sex manual *Married Love* makes her an important point of contact between Irish literature and the birth control movement. Catholic attacks on birth control, which became more prominent in public discourse in England after Marie Stopes began publishing her sex and contraceptive manuals, contradicted O'Brien's own progressive views on sexuality and reproduction. In *Without My Cloak* (1930), O'Brien undermines Catholic doctrine by drawing attention to the tragic possibilities of constant reproduction within marriage. Moreover, she simultaneously undermines the strict heteronormativity of sexology discourse in the early twentieth century, creatively manipulating tropes from Stopes's writings to suggest that men and women may find more sexual satisfaction, without the

fear of reproduction, from same-sex relationships. Because Irish writers were censored for mentioning contraception, the popular *Without My Cloak* helps us to understand how writers like O'Brien could express support for health-based models of sexuality popularized by birth control advocates while never referring to the techniques by which fertility was regulated.

The final chapter of my dissertation, "Fertility Control in Virginia Woolf's Feminist Narratives," analyzes two texts by Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *Three Guineas* (1938). Woolf's covert references to birth control discourse demonstrate her interest in the movement: for example, the title *Three Guineas* refers to the cost of an illegal abortion in interwar London. Besides this direct reference, I also examine moments when Woolf compares men and women's relative power over their reproductive decisions, such as the conflict between Septimus Smith and his wife Rezia over whether they should have children and that conflict's mediation by the eugenic doctor Sir William Bradshaw. Woolf's politicizing of women's (including her own) lack of control over fertility sheds new light on the intersections among her interests in medicine, eugenics, and feminism, which also reflect important nexuses in birth control discourse. Because of her prominence in narratives of twentieth-century feminism, and because of her prescience about the issues that continue to dominate debates over women's roles in private and public life, an analysis of Woolf's entrance into the power dynamics surrounding fertility control is significant to the ongoing feminist conversation about who ideally and actually has control over women's reproductive bodies.

The conclusion of the dissertation comes back to two governing ideas: the claim that literary writers in the post-birth-control era actively redefined concepts of “the erotic” through the alterations they made to traditional marriage plots, and the claim that the social, cultural, and religious milieus of the writers discussed in this project greatly affected the way they understood and “reproduced” birth control discourse in their work. I will end with some reflections on the applicability of the dissertation’s findings to future study of interwar and contemporary literature related to contraception and fertility control.

Certainly, women writers’ and characters’ interactions with the rhetoric, apparatuses, and range of potential effects of contraception are an understudied, underrepresented part of their material lives. This dissertation and similar projects that make readable the influences of Stopes and Sanger’s work on their contemporaries in the literary field function in one capacity as archeological sites for these buried histories of failed, successful, harmful, or promising examples of fertility control; as Capo states, “literature provides a rich social artifact that can track cultural change on multiple levels” (8). However, on another level, this dissertation is not about how Gilman, Larsen, O’Brien, and Woolf recorded or replicated the burgeoning public discourse on birth control in their works, but about how they manipulated and challenged that discourse to express their own re-visions of fertility, sex, and motherhood. By depicting birth control as not simply an influential new paradigm of reproductive politics for women to adopt or reject, but also as the raw material for a variety of new representations of women’s reproductive lives, I hope to reinvest our views of the birth control movement with some

of the creative potential that seems to have been erased by the problematic political affiliations of its founders and the prejudices and hierarchies that dominated their social and rhetorical milieus. Though they do not always fall in line with contemporary feminist ethics or reproductive rights ideologies, these authors' representations of fertility control, "married love," and genetics were fascinatingly heterogeneous, presaging the multi-vocal, creative ideal of feminist politics that is sometimes missing from ongoing conflicts over the politics of reproductive rights.

Chapter One

“Setting Motherhood Free”: Rhetoric and Ideology in Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger

“We must set motherhood free. ... Motherhood, when free to choose the father, free to choose the time and the number of children who shall result from the union, automatically works in wondrous ways. It refuses to bring forth slaves; refuses to bear children who must live under the conditions described. It withholds the unfit, brings forth the fit; brings few children into homes where there is not sufficient to provide for them. Instinctively it avoids all those things which multiply racial handicaps”

Margaret Sanger, *Woman and the New Race* (1920), 45

“Mother England! When will your slavery to ignorance and corruption cease? When will the chains forged upon you by the perversity of priests and politicians be struck from your aching limbs and you be free to obtain the knowledge of how to bear in health and joy the happy scions of an Imperial Race that might even yet flower from our ancient stock?”

Marie Stopes, Epilogue to *Mother England: Letters to Marie Stopes* (1929), 191

Margaret Sanger is well-known to American feminists as the founder of Planned Parenthood and an early vocal advocate for contraception who was jailed for her beliefs; she is also known to participants in debates over abortion rights as a eugenicist whose beliefs about racial “fitness” have undermined her status as a pro-choice hero. Her claim in the above quotation, “We must set motherhood free” is as problematic as it is inspiring, as it implies not only Sanger’s advocacy for women’s agency in decisions

regarding their fertility but also her belief that she and other birth control advocates had established the ideal conditions for childbearing and had a responsibility to prevent the reproduction of “unfit” families. Sanger’s feminist, nationalist, and progressive politics had an important parallel on the other side of the Atlantic, in the work of the British “Mother of Birth Control” Marie Stopes. Stopes, like Sanger, railed against restrictions on contraceptive use by religious and political authority, and, like Sanger, supported her cause through the use of nationalist and eugenic ideas, meant as much to create “happy scions of an Imperial Race” as to improve individual mothers’ health and happiness.

Stopes and Sanger knew each other through their contacts in the circle surrounding Havelock Ellis and the English sexologists and met several times in England; however, their biographers tend to emphasize not the striking similarity of their ideals and their personal connections with one another, but the acrimony between the women. In her 1992 biography of Sanger, Ellen Chesler describes the friendly relationship between the two as short lived: “...Stopes was a blustering and egotistical woman—class bound, politically conservative, blatantly anti-Semitic—and intent on dominating the new field she had staked out. ... [Sanger] spent a weekend at Stopes’s country home early in the summer of 1920, but thereafter always found some excuse for not seeing her when she was in London” (181). In a 1977 biography, Ruth Hall calls Stopes’s relationship with Sanger “a long and bitter rivalry” (185) and quotes Stopes describing Sanger as “worse than silly” (201). Though Stopes wrote a letter in support of Sanger to Woodrow Wilson while Sanger awaited trial under the Comstock Laws in 1915 (Chesler 139), and Sanger gave positive reviews to Stopes’s books *Wise Parenthood* and *Married Love* in

The Birth Control Review (181), the two “Mothers of Birth Control” seem to have regarded themselves more as rivals than as colleagues.

What these biographies neither deny nor fully explore is the notion that any animosity between Stopes and Sanger was likely caused by the close parallels not only between their ideas about sex and contraception, but also between their visions of their own careers. Each woman mythologized her awakening to political consciousness about sex issues, Sanger through her tales of witnessing maternal deaths and failed abortions while nursing in tenement houses in New York, and Stopes through her personal history as the wife who did not recognize her husband’s impotence (Hall 95). In 1920, both Stopes and Sanger attempted to found birth control clinics in London, each wanting to be the first to open such facilities in the British Empire, an honor Stopes eventually claimed (Hall 185). Beginning in 1918 and throughout the twenties, both published best-selling books that combined contraceptive advice with explicit, if somewhat spiritualized, advice about heterosexual sex; the pro-contraception arguments in each of their texts were grounded in concerns about over-population and eugenics. Both were brought before courts: Sanger for her violation of the Comstock Laws, and Stopes in a lawsuit related to an alleged libel against her in Catholic doctor Halliday Sutherland’s 1922 polemic, *Birth Control: A Statement of Christian Doctrine Against the Neo-Malthusians*. And ultimately, both helped found organizations—Sanger’s Planned Parenthood International and Stopes’s Marie Stopes International—that continue to provide low-cost birth control, and still generate controversy years after their deaths. Their shared status as “founding mothers” of the birth control movements seems an obvious reason for their rivalry, but

has not inspired comparative analysis of their work in terms of its persuasive goals and rhetorical features. This chapter will offer such an analysis, drawing connections between these two figures' uses of language in their published work to demonstrate the agenda and persuasive techniques both writers used to shape mainstream birth control discourse in the late 1910s and early 1920s.

Rhetorical Tools for Analyzing Birth Control Discourse

I include this chapter on Stopes and Sanger's rhetorical strategies and goals because I believe that an understanding of the pervasiveness and insightfulness of their appeals on behalf of contraceptive access is necessary to make "readable" moments in literary texts that use and adapt these appeals. In analyzing Stopes and Sanger's persuasive techniques, I hope to demonstrate not only the paradigm of fertility control and reproductive ethics within which post-birth control movement literary writers worked, but also the discourse they critiqued and challenged. I use terms from rhetorical analysis to illustrate how Stopes's and Sanger's texts work in similar ways to convey to their audiences powerful ideas about fertility control, "better breeding" and maternal health. Stopes's and Sanger's writing forwarded their own persuasive goals, and so carries the force of their arguments even when used by different authors in different contexts. Therefore, using the framework of rhetorical analysis allows me to theorize about how the persuasive force of birth control writing might appear in and influence birth control movement-era literary writing. By considering the strong ideological frameworks Stopes and Sanger created, we can see how other writers were influenced by these frameworks, and how they understood and evaluated them in their own work.

Stopes and Sanger created powerful binaries for their women readers to identify with and against, confining different types of women to different roles within birth control discourse by offering agency to their middle-class readers while denying it to working class and immigrant women, whom they perceived as the main beneficiaries of their movement.

Stopes and Sanger appealed to women through depictions of idealized and degraded domestic spaces and statements about the vital importance of seemingly quotidian decisions, injecting politicized discourse into images and discussions women encountered every day. To highlight the ways in which their rhetoric manipulates “everyday” language into political rhetoric, I borrow Michael Calvin McGee’s term “ideograph.” McGee defines “ideograph” in his 1980 article “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology”:

An ideograph is an ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable. (15). In other words, an ideograph is a term that is charged with such strong and transparent values within a particular community that its use implies a whole host of givens and assumptions, and can act as a justification for action or belief even in the absence of more logical arguments. Two ideographs that Stopes and Sanger use in the epigraphs that begin this chapter are “slavery” and “race”; each has a literal, non-ideological meaning, but

both are used here to connote particular values related to the birth control movement. “Slavery” suggests the imprisonment of mothers and children by fertility as African-American and colonial subjects were imprisoned by past tyrants; it contrasts with the term “race,” which carries the uplifting connotation of a collective ideal, offering improvement for the oppressed, over-fertile mother on an individual level but also for the nation as a whole. The contrast between “slavery” and “race,” particularly in Stopes’s use of “Imperial Race,” suggests a connection between fertility control and historical progress toward, on the one hand, universal freedom, and, on the other hand, the triumph of the British over other “races.” Although the logical connections between motherhood, slavery, and race are not explained, the authors draw on these words because they are familiar to audiences conversant in eugenics discourse and use them to justify their own adaptation of that discourse to limit births and provide equal access to contraceptive technology. While other rhetoricians use concepts similar to McGee’s ideograph,⁴ I find McGee useful because he emphasizes the situated-ness of ideographs within particular communities or movements: while he notes that such ideas usually support the “dominant

⁴ McGee’s definition of an “ideograph” has resonance with other philosophical and rhetorical concepts of words or phrases that carry a great deal of ideological baggage. For example, *The Grammar of Motives* (1945), Kenneth Burke identified “God terms,” such as “Freedom” and “knowledge,” as words that signify the “ultimate motivation,” or transcendent positive value their users “terministic screen,” or set of linguistic symbols (355-6). Norman Fairclough and other critical discourse analysts look at the assumptions, sometimes ideological, that are inherent in even simple exchanges; in *Analysing Discourse*, Fairclough attempts to distinguish words that denote ideologies from those that simply rest on “propositional assumptions” using social-scientific analysis of audiences (58-9).

ideology,” he also suggests that they “come to be as a part of the real lives of the people whose motives they articulate” (“Ideograph” 7; “‘Ideograph’ as a Unit of Analysis” 80).

Stopes and Sanger used the images and terms I am identifying as ideographs to challenge public perceptions and inherited ideas about reproduction: for example, to undermine the association of large families with prosperity or religious piety. They challenged religious and political authorities regarding fertility control by crafting their own value system based on absolutes often as firm as those that characterized previous ethical systems of reproduction, but in order to do so, they had to manipulate the binaries that governed discourse on fertility control, replacing older ideals of motherhood and childbearing with their own views. I will examine some of those binaries using the idea of dissociation, drawn from structural linguistics and articulated in the work of Chaim Perelman in *The New Rhetoric*. In reconfiguring the values relevant to marriage and motherhood, Stopes and Sanger created and used what Perelman termed “philosophical pairs,” comparisons based on a value hierarchy in which one term (Term I) acts as a positive or “natural” descriptor, and the other term represents that which differs negatively from the ideal implied by Term I. One of Perelman’s examples is “accident/essence,” in which “accident” indicates a peculiar and sub-standard version of the “essence” that represents the typical (positive) characterization of a group/event/idea (420). Stopes and Sanger’s advocacy for birth control introduces dissociative pairs that manipulate their audience’s beliefs about social class, genetics, and scientific progress, providing characters and ideas for the audience to identify with or against. One example is Sanger’s use of the terms “fit” and “unfit” in the epigraph that began this chapter.

Sanger employs “fit” as a “term II” idea, indicating to her audience that they should divide families in such a way as to value and support those who produce genetically healthy children (and undermining Victorian ideals of charity toward the underprivileged “unfit”); this pairing of concepts, which echoes previous articulations by advocates of eugenics, imparts to Sanger’s readers a new point of identity for themselves—“fit”—as well as a potential goal—to eliminate or rehabilitate the “unfit.”

Perelman’s ideas about dissociative binaries have been critiqued and adapted by Kenneth Burke, whose “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle” emphasizes the emotionally manipulative binary of “victim” and “villain” that often appears in politically motivated rhetoric (165-8, 187). Michael Blain, analyzing the rhetoric of social movements in terms of Burke’s theories, describes “victimage rhetoric” as “a melodramatic narrative involving the membership categories of victims, villains, heroes, and spectators. . . . Villains are constructed in descriptions of their victimizing actions. . . . The ‘agents’ who must stand up to and fight the enemies must be transformed into heroic protagonists” (818-9). Stopes and Sanger use the victim/villain binary in their discourse to align their audience against institutions and traditions that limit access to contraception and to gain the audience’s sympathy for the “victims” of over-fertility, often lower-class mothers. Stopes’s commentary in the above epigraph on the “perversity of priests and politicians” is one example of the extreme vilification of opponents to birth control in her discourse, which implies sexual sadism in suggesting that the “perverse” authority figures rejoice in the pain of over-fertile mothers. In addition, her apostrophe to “Mother England” in her slavery suggests both the sympathy that “victimage” rhetoric evokes for prey of

“villains,” but also the helplessness that “victims” in this rhetoric evoke: Mother England is idealized, but put in chains, awaiting rescue by birth control activists to free her from “ignorance and corruption.” Sanger’s injunction above that “We must set motherhood free” works in a similar way, expressing veneration for “motherhood,” but representing it as subordinate to both those who would force it to “bring forth slaves” and the “we”—presumably advocates for contraception—who will be able to set it free. Agency here is the purview of birth control advocates, who empower ordinary women only through their singularly heroic actions and unique knowledge about fertility control.

I will examine some of the ideographs and dissociations Stopes and Sanger most frequently employed in their published work in order to offer a framework for understanding the persuasive tools and tropes that characterized birth control movement discourse. In parsing Stopes and Sanger’s advocacy texts, I hope to establish two claims important to my subsequent analyses of literary texts: first, that British and American birth controllers envisioned the ideological structure of their movement in remarkably similar ways; and, second, that the movement provided points of identification to audiences of middle-class women, like the writers I analyze in later chapters, who would both benefit from and carry out its vision. There is an important distinction between the rhetoric of Stopes and Sanger, who struggled to establish a movement and persuade middle-class audiences to adopt their values and agenda, and the writing of the literary authors, who represent birth control politics in more complicated and often more ambivalent ways. Rather than echoing Stopes and Sanger’s “victimage” rhetoric, we can see Gilman, Larsen, O’Brien, and Woolf as participating in what Burke calls

“consubstantiation,” a process of momentary or partial identification with a movement, which implies both a critical perspective on that movement and a personal investment in the movement’s ideas that allows authors to adapt and manipulate its discourse to their own ends.

I will concentrate here on four books emblematic of the birth control movement’s agenda: Stopes’s *Married Love* and *Wise Parenthood*, and Sanger’s *Woman and the New Race* and *The Pivot of Civilization*. While these are by no means all of the works with which followers of the birth control movement would be familiar (later chapters will examine Stopes’s later books, articles in Sanger’s *Birth Control Review*, and other sources frequently referenced in birth control discourse), they are among the best-known texts associated with the movement, and they provide a convenient starting place for an investigation into the ideographs their writers employed.

Women’s Bodies and Women’s Rights

Sexology and sex instruction manuals were hardly a novel phenomenon in the late 1910s, when Stopes and Sanger began publishing their books and articles: this was the era of “sexology,” when writers all over the world were theorizing about the range of human sexual behavior and its physical and psychological implications. However, while the works of Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud were popular in the early twentieth century because of their theories about diseased or “abnormal” sexual bodies of the hysterical female or the homosexual subject, Stopes and Sanger both insisted that their writings were focused on healthy, heterosexual, married couples. Stopes defines her audience in her preface to *Married Love*: “In the following pages I speak to those—and

in spite of all our neurotic literature and plays they are in the great majority—who are nearly normal, and who are married or about to be married, and hope, but do not know how, to make their marriages beautiful and happy” (10). By making obvious the difference between the pathologized bodies of Ellis and Freud and the women’s bodies they themselves analyze, but nevertheless insisting on the need for their own verbal “display” of these bodies, these writers actually pathologize, or at least medicalize, the “normal” aspects of fertility control, reproduction, and sexuality. The woman’s body, in these texts, becomes a battleground in a war between uncontrollable, degraded, and often fatal fertility and the possibility for an elevated, controlled, and psychologically and physically healthy sexual expression

The dying or sickly mother is the most obvious symbol of the threat of over-fertility to the modern woman. Stopes and Sanger were aware of the emotional resonance of rhetoric about mothers, and used it frequently, crafting ideographs related to the health consequences of frequent childbearing using both abstract language and concrete images of types of suffering women. A recurring symbol in birth control activists’ writing is the body of the woman who suffers through too many childbirths, finding herself beaten down and physically weak, or weary and poverty-stricken from caring for a multitude of children. The image shows women as victims of unrestrained fertility and “politicians and priests” who limit access to birth control information; not only does it evoke readers’ sympathy by manipulating the powerful symbol of the mother in danger, but it also sets the stage for a heroic rescue by birth control advocates, who can literally save women’s lives through allowing them to properly space their offspring.

Both Sanger and Stopes gave examples of women whose suffering through childbearing inspired them to be those heroes, to devote their lives to fertility control. Sanger made famous the story of Sadie Sachs, a Bronx woman whom she treated while working as a nurse, and who died from an attempted abortion after Sanger's supervising doctor refused to give her information about contraception. According to Sanger, the doctor answered Sachs's inquiries "with a joking sneer," and "Three months later, I was aroused from my sleep on midnight. ... Another conception had forced [Sachs] into the hands of a cheap abortionist, and she died ... I threw my nursing bag into the corner and announced to my family that I would never take another case until I had made it possible for working women in America to have knowledge of birth control" (Sanger *Case 9*)

Stopes also recounts a tale of woe from her experience as a biology teacher: one of her medical students met with a woman who had lost four children to defects caused by her husband's syphilis, but whose doctor would neither diagnose the husband's illness nor provide her with information on contraception. Stopes describes her reaction to her student's story as the moment of inspiration for her own books and clinic work: "That not only such ill-fated mothers, but that all mothers, should be freed from the appalling slavery of unwilling and undesired motherhood, became a conviction so intense as to necessitate action" (*Wise Parenthood*, Epilogue, n.p.). The emotional language pervading these examples illustrates their importance to the ideology of the birth control movement, as Stopes and Sanger insist on the humanitarian significance of their work by dramatizing the life-and-death consequences of access to birth control. The double-victimhood of most of the suffering women on whom Sanger and Stopes focus—they are not only

women, but also working class, immigrants, Catholics, or wives of alcoholics or syphilitics—appeals to the sympathy of middle-class women who make up the main audience for most of their texts and on whose money and political agency the movement relied. It also, however, places these women in a position of relative power over weak, over-fertile mothers who are in need of the birth control movement’s brand of salvation.

Victims of over-fertility are “othered” in subtle but telling ways in birth control movement texts, which shared assumptions about race and “fitness” with existing discourses arising out of Social Darwinism, eugenics, and racist traditions. The term “enslavement” appears frequently in Stopes and Sanger’s writings, usually referring to working class or poor women. For example, in *Married Love* Stopes declares, “in the whole human relation there is no slavery or torture so horrible as coerced, unwilling motherhood” (84). In *Woman and the New Race*, Sanger presents an image of poor women as the slaves of their husbands, suggesting that such women need to be protected against “the workingman”: “There are no eight-hour laws to protect the mother against overwork and toil in the home; no laws to protect her against ill health and the diseases of pregnancy and reproduction. In fact there has been almost no thought or consideration given for the protection of the mother in the home of the workingman” (48). In these passages, Stopes and Sanger draw on a white feminist rhetorical tradition of associating women’s oppression by men with historical instances of slavery.⁵ The above quotations clearly elide or simplify the economic conditions that perpetuated slavery and wage

⁵ For a critique of this technique among white American feminists in the 19th and 20th centuries, see the chapter “Racism and Feminism” in bell hooks’ *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*.

slavery in Western culture; however, in doing so, they fulfill the function of the ideograph—to tie the claim at hand to a simplified, emotional audience response, in this case associated with an offense against the universally elevated value of motherhood, which is degraded here by its connection with images of slavery. Sanger’s claim in this chapter’s epigraph that “Motherhood...refuses to bring forth slaves” invokes the contrast between Motherhood as an ideal in Western society and motherhood’s real-life degradation by enforced ignorance about contraception. The image of a debased universal Motherhood builds at least superficial connections across classes of women, even as references to slavery and oppression invite Sanger and Stopes’s middle-class audiences to appropriate the language of oppression for themselves.

The authors’ references to slavery also invoke narratives of freedom, tying in the development of fertility control with humankind’s progress from oppression to liberation. In *The Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger uses “enslavement” in resonance with a broad conception of feminism and women’s rights, saying “in the age-old enslavement of woman [man] has enslaved himself.” Her remedy for women’s enslavement lies specifically in women’s own reformation of their experiences with sex and reproduction: “women must elevate sex into another sphere, whereby it may subserve and enhance the possibility of individual and human expression” (212). Even more specifically, Stopes asks her readers “When will the chains forged upon you by the perversity of priests and politicians be struck from your aching limbs and you be free to obtain the knowledge of how to bear [children] in health and joy?” Released from the bonds of slavery, sex and reproduction (within certain implied, usually class-bound, contexts) become the means to

development not only of individual women's self-determination, but also of a new era of human history in which children are universally healthy, valued, and happy.

Like references to women's "enslavement," descriptions of poor women as "degraded," "ignorant" and "primitive" are meant to evoke a response that emotionally attracts a middle-class audience at the same time it identifies lower-class women as the victims of over-reproductions and the objects of birth control reform. In an appeal for funds for her "Mothers' Clinic" at the end of some editions of *Wise Parenthood*, Stopes explicitly declares that poor women are the intended beneficiaries of her activism: "although the knowledge of birth control has been freely circulating in our country for many years, it has been available chiefly for the educated and the well-to-do. The really poor, the utterly thriftless, the ignorant and miserable have been shut out..." (*Wise Parenthood*, Epilogue, n.p.). In *Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger elaborates on the principles behind providing birth control to lower-class women: "So terrible, so unbelievable, are these conditions of child-bearing, degraded far below the level of primitive and barbarian tribes, nay, even below the plane of brutes, that many high-minded people, confronted with such revolting and disgraceful facts, lose that calmness of vision ... so necessary in any serious consideration of this vital problem" (117). She goes on to argue that charitable contributions are damaging to the welfare of the mothers she describes above, because extending their health and lives allows them to continue producing more human beings "below the plane of brutes." The purpose of this passage seems two-fold: first, to impress the reader with the severity of the situation Sanger describes, thus winning her audience's sympathy for birth control; and, second to evoke disgust in the middle-class

audience, who will seek to avoid identification with the “brutes” described, and will therefore be more likely to support programs of fertility control and sterilization over charitable programs, particularly those proposed by institutions, like churches, that oppose birth control.⁶ By exaggerating the “primitive and barbarian” nature of uncontrolled motherhood, Sanger implicitly contrasts it with modern, medicalized, controlled fertility, which she argues will not only improve but also eradicate such “revolting” child-bearing scenarios. Using the technique Perelman calls dissociation, she establishes a binary between the childbearing of the “high-minded” middle- and upper-classes and working class childbearing, elevating middle-class fertility control (and, implicitly, sexual restraint) in order to impress upon her readers the sharp distinction between themselves and the “primitive” objects of her rhetoric.

Stopes offers further characterization of the role of working class women as objects of birth control advocates’ pity, care and condescension in describing working women’s relationship with birth control in *Wise Parenthood*: “The most difficult cases of all... are the women who are dissolute, harried, overworked and worried into a dull or careless apathy... These too often will not, or cannot, take the care and trouble to adjust ordinary methods of control so as to secure themselves from undesirable conceptions”

⁶ Debates between advocates for contraception and religious institutions (particularly the Catholic Church) are well known and on-going, a fact which Stopes and Sanger both highlighted in their published works. Stopes demonstrates her perception of the severity of the obstacles facing the birth control movement from religious authority in *Wise Parenthood*: “The Memorandum of the Bishops of the Anglican Catholic Church, the pronouncement in congress of the main body of Christian Nonconformists, and the Jewish Church [sic], have all very similarly condemned what they call ‘artificial’ methods. The Roman Catholic Church in particular is the most unyielding” (11).

(36). Stopes's solution is a "gold pin" IUD, which she recommends specifically for working class women with several children, because of its potential to cause permanent infertility (37). Stopes's assumption that the working-class woman who "will not" use an "ordinary method" of contraception should still be convinced (or required) to control her fertility, as well as her description of the "dull and careless apathy" that characterizes these women, reflects the highly codified class implications of birth control activists' view of ideal motherhood. While well-intentioned, particularly in the context of the available alternatives for working-class women, the language of what birth control historian Carole McCann calls "racial maternalism"⁷ was more emotionally attractive to the audiences of birth control texts than sensitive to the actual needs of the women it described. The ideograph of the working class mother in birth control literature serves two functions for that audience. First, it evokes feelings of pity and sympathy in Stopes and Sanger's audiences, placing them in the position of benefactors to less fortunate women (a position to which middle- and upper-class women would be accustomed) and motivating them with charitable impulses, even as Sanger stated her opposition to conventional "charity." Second, this ideograph solidifies the audience's disassociation from "dull and careless" or "primitive" poor mothers. This disassociation may offer a

⁷McCann uses "racial maternalism" to describe the birth control movement's assumption that fertility control, as it was administered by Sanger and Stopes's clinics and through doctors sympathetic to their cause, would serve as a solution to immigrant and working class women's social, physical, financial, and familial problems. In *Birth Control Politics in the United States*, McCann argues, "These programs [those of welfare feminists practicing racial maternalism] defined the remedies needed by poor, ethnic women in terms of the dominant culture's standards of mental, moral, and physical health and well-being. The racial maternalist programs first required assimilation of the dominant culture's standards and then fostered equal opportunity" (56)

further incentive for them to value fertility control in their own lives, but also depicts the needs of poor women in terms of the policies advocated by birth control advocates rather than in terms of such women's own perceptions of their needs.

Spiritual Orgasms in Birth Control Discourse

In opposition to these representations of women as beleaguered and poverty-stricken, Stopes and Sanger offer values and images that demonstrate the elevation of (presumably young, white, middle-class) women through reproductive freedom. This elevation occurs through the greater satisfaction that the contraception-user can get out of sex (with her husband), and in depicting it, both Stopes and Sanger conflate physical passion and orgasm with spiritual epiphany and growth. Stopes and Sanger most often utilize the terms "spiritual" or "spiritualized," along with "mystical," as ideographs that connote not only a holy or otherworldly emotional experience, but also an experience of sexual arousal and orgasm that applied to both sexes but seemed particularly to connote female pleasure. For example, in *Married Love*, Stopes refers to adolescent curiosity about the opposite sex as "mystical, alluring, enchanting" (18); to "the glow of spiritual understanding" between married couples (21); and to sexual positions that offer the most "mental and spiritual, as well as sensory harmony" (56). In each of these instances, Stopes depicts sexuality in terms that emphasize the "higher," rather than the physical pleasures of intimacy; in fact, she describes the spiritualized benefits of sex as arising out of couples' sensory experience. There is a clear distinction here between the potential ravages of unprotected sex and the idealized spiritual orgasm of the woman in a relationship governed by Stopes's own vision of mental, physical, and spiritual health.

For the latter, seemingly, contraception offers not only protection from overwork, infection, and exhaustion, but also potential for personal growth that transcends her former possibilities for sexual pleasure previous to using birth control.

Though Stopes is more frequently identified with exalted discourse on sexuality, in *Woman and the New Race* Sanger makes a direct argument for a “new morality” revolving around contraception that utilizes a similar romantic and overblown style:

...the world has been growing to the realization that a great love between a man and woman is a holy thing, freighted with great possibilities for spiritual growth. The fear of unwanted children removed, the assurance that she will have a sufficient amount of time in which to develop her love life to its greatest beauty, with its comradeship in many fields—these will lift woman by the very soaring quality of her innermost self to spiritual heights that few have attained. (181)

This passage appears within the framework of Sanger’s argument against religious institutions that have condemned birth control as immoral. Considering this context, I would suggest that birth control advocates’ use of words like “spiritual” and “mystical” provided an entry point for Stopes and Sanger into religious and moral discourse, giving some readers a way to look at sex, and particularly sex in the absence of conception and reproduction, that resonated with the “higher” values of mental and moral development typically associated with traditional religious value systems. Yet, at the same time that the term “spiritual” resonates with familiar religious discourse, it also, as Sanger’s argument demonstrates, distinguishes her movement from previous, strongly patriarchal, social and religious systems, offering a vague but exciting vision of a new, progressive

religious discourse that gives at least some women the chance to develop the “very soaring quality of their innermost selves.” If the birth control movement posited contraception as the cure-all to the poor woman’s financial and familial afflictions, it also named fertility control the savior for the middle-class modern woman plagued by an unfulfilling emotional relationship or psychological crisis.

For feminists and middle-class activists in Britain and the United States, the social narrative being constructed by their advocacy of birth control was compelling: not only would the poor be eradicated and the immigrant assimilated through the practices of spacing births and regulating family size to income level, but the middle-class themselves would achieve both physical satisfaction and sublime spiritual development within their marriages. Stopes and Sanger offered a re-vision of women’s worlds into binaries of “good”—controlled, sexually satisfying, and “hygienic”—and “bad”—over-fertile, poverty-plagued, sexually degraded—reproductive lives. These categories offered their middle class readers roles as both the objects and the agents of social change on a grand scale, while limiting the identity possibilities for working class or poor women to those of victim or survivor of uncontrolled reproduction.

Eugenics Ideology: Vitality and Degeneracy

In 2008, a Planned Parenthood clinic in Idaho came under public scrutiny after one of its employees accepted a donation made by a caller who said he was donating because “the less black kids out there, the better.” The caller was an actor hired by an anti-abortion group to bait the clinic, and Planned Parenthood of Idaho immediately apologized when a tape of the call was made public (Forester), but the incident generated

heated controversy not only because of the Idaho clinic's condoning of racism, but also because of historical tensions between American birth control advocates and marginalized groups, tensions that arise in part from the early movement's courting of allies among advocates of eugenics, or the selective breeding of human beings for the "improvement" of a population. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British and American Eugenics Societies and their many allied organizations and movements were widely accepted participants in and architects of a variety of social movements, including boy and girl scouting, reforms related to immigration and education, environmental conservation, Prohibition, and birth control (Hasian 5). The goal of eugenicists was to advocate "racial betterment" through increasing the relative numbers of "fit" (i.e. intelligent, physically healthy, middle-class, and usually Northern European) citizens in comparison to the "unfit" masses of the industrial revolution. Positive eugenicists advocated policies for increasing the birth rate of "fit" citizens, while negative eugenicists wanted to curtail the reproduction of the "unfit," though restrictions on marriage, tight immigration laws, institutionalization, and even sterilization. Eugenics-related arguments, particularly arguments related to negative eugenics, became integral to birth control ideology in the late 1910s as Sanger and Stopes formed close relationships with English eugenicists Havelock Ellis and H.G. Wells (Chesler 197).

Marouf Hasian argues that middle-class white women were "among the primary social actors" in the eugenics movements in Britain and America (72); he also notes that women's interest in the topic arose out of their frustration with their lack of control over their reproductive lives: "...the new eugenics movement seemed to recognize the

importance of reproduction in the creation of social, economic, and political relationships” (73). The combination of eugenics and birth control discourse thus allowed (white, middle-class) women to claim a role as “fit” mothers of fewer children and also to serve as arbiters of the reproductive fates of less privileged women in the name of racial uplift or eugenic progress. Like rhetorically effective images of weak, “primitive” over-fertile mothers, arguments for eugenic motherhood offered a sense of power to audiences of birth control rhetoric, even as that sense of power was limited and corrupted by its racist and classist implications as well as its ultimate disregard for individual women’s choices about their family size. For example, Sanger’s claim in the epigraph to this chapter that “free motherhood” “withholds the unfit, brings forth the fit; brings few children into homes where there is not sufficient to provide for them” appeals to women’s power to regulate their reproductive lives while implicitly circumscribing that power with the suggestion that truly “free” mothers will bear healthy, economically stable families, placing mothers of sick or poor children outside the umbrella of “free motherhood.”

Both Stopes and Sanger supported negative eugenics throughout most of their careers, but fought against eugenicists who advocated positive eugenics, which went counter to their argument that larger families were inherently “dysgenic.”⁸ In a 1919

⁸ The distinction between Stopes and Sanger’s version of negative eugenics, which focused on the individual woman’s right to limit her family size as well as on the state’s responsibility to limit children born to the “unfit,” and mainstream eugenicists’ two-pronged approach of encouraging population growth among the “fit” while limiting dysgenic births is a repeated trope in this dissertation, and is particularly significant to my analysis of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*.

article in the *Birth Control Review*, Sanger outlines the differences she sees between birth control and eugenic philosophies:

We who advocate Birth Control ... lay all our emphasis upon stopping not only the reproduction of the unfit but upon stopping all reproduction when there is not economic means of providing proper care for those who are born in health. The eugenicist also believes that a woman should bear as many healthy children as possible as a duty to the state. We hold that the world is already over-populated. Eugenicists imply or insist that a woman's first duty is to the state; we contend that her duty to herself is her first duty to the state. (11)

Sanger's distinctions seem to imply that the birth control movement is an advance upon and an extension of eugenics; she sees her movement as "not only" curtailing dysgenic reproduction, but also encompassing broader issues of children's economic and physical well-being. We can also see that she imagines her version of eugenics as feminist, since although later in that article she gives her support for "the sterilization of the feeble-minded, the insane and the syphilitic [sic]", the statement that a woman's "duty to herself is her first duty to the state" emphasizes women's autonomy in reproductive decision-making. The cognitive dissonance that arises here between Sanger's belief in forced sterilization and her insistence on women's reproductive autonomy arises out of the dichotomy she builds between "fit" and "unfit" parents: the former, who presumably include Sanger's audience, "deserve" their autonomy because of their mental and

physical “fitness,” while the latter are rendered as wholly “other,” lacking the capability as well as the right to speak for their own reproductive desires or experiences.

Like Sanger in the above passage, Stopes differentiates her project from that of the eugenicists, saying in *Married Love*, “Of the innumerable problems which touch upon the qualities transmitted to the children by their parents, the study of which may be covered by the general term Eugenics, I shall here say nothing” (84). She focuses instead on the degenerating health of large families, citing statistics such as “Dr. Ploetz found that while the death-rate of first born infants is about 220 per thousand, the death-rate of the seventh-born is about 330, and of the twelfth-born is 597 per thousand. ... What a hideous orgy of agony for the mothers to produce in anguish death-doomed, suffering infants” (87). Instead of aligning themselves directly with the Eugenics movement in their texts, Stopes and Sanger both use language that evokes the concerns of that movement: anxiety about the stability of economic and racial power structures; an emphasis on physical strength and beauty, and enthusiasm for supposedly distinct characteristics of Anglo and Nordic Western culture. This language allowed Sanger and Stopes to harness the rhetorical power of eugenics while maintaining a sense of their own movement’s more complicated focus on women’s rights and health as well as “racial betterment.”

An ideograph that aligned the birth control movement with eugenics as well as with women’s health was the term “vitality,” which is used in Stopes and Sanger’s texts to denote physical and mental strength, with the additional connotation of a healthy sexual appetite, qualities upon which the future of “the race” would depend. Stopes uses

the term to refer to the physical vigor and strong sex drive to be found in those who follow her advice about sex and reproduction, but also, at some points in *Married Love*, uses it to refer to an idealized vision of women's sex drives, which for her correspond to the "Periodicity of Recurrence" that she argues governs women's susceptibility to sexual pleasure.⁹ Describing a woman's responses to the "sex-tides" that determine her availability for sex, Stopes claims, "Partly or wholly unconscious of the brilliance and full perfection of her beauty, she yet delights in its gentle promptings to reveal itself to her lover's eyes... This innocent, this goddess-like self-confidence retreats when the natural ebb of her vitality returns" (70). In other words, the "flow" of women's sexual arousal at certain times of the month leads to vitality, which then disappears during the "ebbing" periods. In this passage, vitality seems available (at certain times) to all women and relates specifically to their positive experience of sexual intercourse. Stopes offers a caveat that reveals her association of healthy sexuality with fresh air, leisure, and a happy marriage, qualities associated with Stopes's personal ideals but not available to all working class women: "The effects of fatigue, city life, bad feeling, and indeed, of most

⁹ The Periodicity of Recurrence is Stopes's contribution to scientific research on sexuality in *Married Love*. She explains the project thus: "I have found that wives (particularly happy wives whose feelings are not complicated by the stimulus of another love) who have been separated from the husbands for some months through professional or business duties—whose husbands, for instance, are abroad—are the women from whom the best and most definitive evidence of a fundamental rhythm of feeling can be obtained. Such women, yearning daily for the tender comradeship and nearness of their husbands, find, in addition, at particular times, an accession of longing for the close physical union of the final sex-act. Many such separated wives feel this; and those I have asked to keep track of the dates, have, with remarkable unanimity, told me that these times came specially just before and some week or so after the close of menstruation, coming, that is, about every fortnight. It is from such women that I got the first clue to the knowledge of what I call the Law of Periodicity of Recurrence of desire in women" (39).

outward circumstances may be very marked, and may ... so reduce her vitality that a woman may never have experienced any spontaneous sex-impulse at all" (42). At other points, Stopes associates the term more generally with both men's and women's sexual health, as in this statement about the importance of couples' sexual enjoyment free of pregnancy early in their marriages: "And with the loss of that early rapture the two lose, for the rest of their lives, the irradiating joy which is priceless not only for its beauty, but for the vitality with which its wings are laden" (82). Stopes's suggestion that the "irradiating joy" of sex without fear of pregnancy carries "vitality" to a couple's future life demonstrates the over-determination of the term "vitality" in this discourse; it seems to stand in here for long-lasting sexual pleasure for the couple, a strong emotional bond that results from their "early rapture," and the ability to bear strong and healthy children. By positing that sexual acts (between married couples) are valuable to human health (and future reproduction) in and of themselves, in addition, Stopes ties her efforts as a sexologist and birth control activist into larger goals for the development of racial "health and beauty" that she expounds more fully in the first chapters of *Wise Parenthood*.

If Stopes uses the term "vitality" to refer to the increased strength and sexual satisfaction of married couples that practice birth control, Sanger broadens the term to more overtly demonstrate the "vitalizing" effects of the birth control movement on society as a whole. Here, I will examine three different contexts in which Sanger's uses of "vitality" in *Pivot of Civilization*, each of which has similar implications for that work's associations with eugenic ideology. First, Sanger combines references to women's slavery with references to vitality (or, more accurately, a lack thereof) when she uses the

term to describe the effects of working class poverty and overfertility on a woman interviewed as part of a National Consumer's League investigation into conditions at Rhode Island textile mills:

We are presented with a vivid picture of one of these slave mothers: a woman of thirty-eight who looks at least fifty with her worn, furrowed face. Asked why she had been working at night for the last two years, she pointed to a six-months old baby she was carrying, to five small children swarming about her, and answered laconically "Too much children."... In addition to raising and bearing these children, her work [at a textile mill] would sap the vitality of any ordinary person. (38)

In this passage, Sanger emphasizes her belief that "over-breeding" is the *cause* of normal women's and children's deficiencies, rather than simply an effect of "feeble-mindedness," as adherents of eugenics who subscribed to genetic determinism would argue.¹⁰ Though emphasizing the woman's low social class by describing her as "laconic" and quoting her grammatically incorrect comment "too much children," she also insists that the woman is simply an "ordinary person" whose vitality has been destroyed by her circumstances. Note that Sanger claims specifically that the woman's "work" has sapped her "vitality"; this reference to the woman's job in the mill effectively defines vitality as

¹⁰ Richard Soloway's description of the entrenched genetic determinist position of eugenicists in the 1910s illustrates the contrast I am evoking here: "Even though genetics had by 1914 demonstrated that heredity was the result of an unpredictable complex mixture of genes, most eugenicists continued to believe that inherited characteristics, however polygenetic in origin and imperfectly understood, were still predominant in the determination of individual and class fitness" (Soloway 371-2).

a good that is accessible to middle- and upper-class women, who presumably do not do the hard work that this woman is unlikely to escape, even if she were able to control her fertility.

In other contexts, Sanger is less ambiguous in her references to the over-breeding masses and evinces less sympathy for the individual working class woman. For example, as part of her rejection of Victorian ideals of charity, she claims, “While we may admire the patience and the deep human sympathy with which the great specialists in feeble-mindedness have expressed the hope of drying up the sources of this evil or of rendering it harmless, we should not permit sympathy or sentimentality to blind us to the fact that health and vitality and human growth likewise need cultivation” (*Pivot* 93). Here, Sanger’s concern is for the whole of human progress, which has apparently been retarded by social scientists’ focus on improving the lives of “the feeble-minded,” a term whose broad application in eugenics discourse allows it to refer to the mentally and physically disabled, those with criminal backgrounds, and/or the chronically poor.¹¹ The thrust of her argument in *Pivot of Civilization* is that birth control, including the enforced sterilization of the “unfit,” will be the solution to a variety of social ills, including hunger, war, and disease. By downplaying the value of curing “feeble-mindedness” in the grand scheme of human progress, Sanger offers a vision of the world in which the “vitality” of those who are already relatively healthy is prioritized over the more difficult and

¹¹ Hasian suggests that “feeble-minded” was used to refer to “any individual who was considered to have mental, moral, or social deficiencies” (7).

potentially hopeless work of rehabilitating the “unfit,” who presumably will eventually become extinct under Sanger’s program.

Finally, in a chapter on the economic significance of contraception, Sanger narrows the meaning of the term “vitality” to connote American social progress, further defining the boundaries of those who will benefit from her application of birth control ideology and technology to human breeding. She argues, “the newer economists are beginning to recognize that their science heretofore failed to take into account ... the overwhelming importance of national vitality and well-being” (136). This chapter of *Pivot*, entitled “Neglected Factors of the World Problem,” emphasizes the importance of birth control to the preservation of Western civilization; thus, Sanger’s concern with “national vitality” excludes immigrants to America from Southern Europe and Asia, who were frequently the target of eugenicists’ outrage.¹² In the context of the eugenics movement’s emphasis on preserving America’s white national character, Sanger’s reference to “national vitality” can be read both economically and racially; in both senses, however, the reference further characterizes working class social actors and immigrants as a drain on the nation’s financial and genetic resources. Each of Sanger’s uses of the word “vitality” presents it as a scarce, intangible resource that can theoretically be preserved for both the individual and the state through the use of contraception, but is

¹² In the widely read eugenicist and racist text *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*, Lothrop Stoddard describes the state of immigration in the United States thus: “Our country, originally settled almost exclusively by Nordics [sic], was toward the close of the nineteenth century invaded by hordes of immigrant Alpines and Mediterraneans, not to mention Asiatic elements like Levantines and Jews. As a result, the Nordic native American has been crowded out with amazing rapidity by these swarming, prolific aliens” (165).

actually likely to be reserved for those with the financial wherewithal to avoid “vitality sapping” drudgery, hunger, and poverty. By emphasizing the potential for increased human vitality in her eugenic arguments, she offers the possibility of a smaller, but uniformly mentally and physically healthy human population, contrasting this ideal with positive eugenicists’ argument for greater numbers of white Americans, but still appealing to the values of racial “progress” and economic prosperity that underlay the assertions of the larger eugenics movement. She also implicitly identifies birth control advocates as the saviors not only of individual women subjected to the draining drudgery of repeated motherhood, but also of “national vitality” itself, the victim of overpopulation and indiscriminate breeding.

“Free Motherhood”: Mothers and Eugenic Families

As I mentioned above, Stopes’s and Sanger’s eugenics-oriented references to the “vitality” of the nation and the individual woman assigned value to people and sexual partnerships based on a dichotomy between the extremes of idealized reproductive “fitness” and degraded reproductive “unfitness.” All of the texts I examine in this dissertation manifest an anxiety about parenting “fitness” that reflects not only a concern with the racial essentialism of the eugenics movement, but also an increasing sense of parents’, and particularly women’s, responsibilities to regulate their reproduction for the good of their families and the race. The eugenic programme of the birth control movement staked its success on the ability of mothers, and particularly working class and poor mothers, to realize better health and happiness through following Stopes and Sanger’s advice for protecting the race from their mates and offspring. The “fit mother”

therefore takes on the role of an ideograph in this discourse; whether successful in her attempts to choose an appropriate partner and bear healthy children, or thwarted in this project by circumstances or poor decisions, the mother who recognizes her duty to uplift humanity and prevent dysgenic reproduction is held up as a model and a deserving object of the assistance of birth control advocates.

The idealization of the “fit” mother, however, brings with it both responsibility and power in birth control discourse. Several features of Sanger and Stopes’s discourse, including their frequent quotation of desperate letters from wives hoping to avoid pregnancy with their shiftless or drunken husbands, their advocacy of woman-controlled contraceptive devices like the diaphragm, and their repeated connections between birth control and women’s sexual pleasure, indicate that birth control discourse figures women as the gatekeepers of sex and reproduction. This gatekeeper role, however, is associated as much with the movement’s emphasis on “racial health” and collective responsibility for bearing “fit” citizens as it is with individual mothers’ comfort and fulfillment, particularly when it is applied to working class women whose responsibility is to avoid reproducing their “unfit” genetic line.

In *Woman and the New Race*, Sanger outlines the poor mother’s role as the guardian of her race against degeneration and ill health. She gives voice to the self-castigating poor mother in the chapter “Cries of Despair,” which reprints letters she has received encouraging her in her pro-birth control advocacy. One reads, in part, “Now, Mrs. Sanger, ...even in my ignorance, I had sense enough to know that I had no right to bring these children into such a world where they could not have decent care...I

committed a crime by bringing them into the world, their father was syphilitic” (82). In her analysis of this letter, the last in her chapter, Sanger offers this revealing commentary on the role of such women: “All the social handicaps and evils of the day are woven into these letters—and out of each of them rises the challenging facts...society has not yet learned to permit motherhood to stand guard for itself, its children, the common good and the coming race” (83-4). Sanger’s correspondent’s remorse over her own bearing of poor, probably syphilitic children is thus connected to the variety of “social handicaps” that will need to be eliminated not directly, but through the control, both personal and eventually societal and governmental, of women’s reproductive bodies. In her commentary, she both devalues the woman’s children as dangers to “the common good and the coming race” and suggests such women’s inherent power to “stand guard over” their fertility using contraception. Again, birth control advocates are posited as the heroes responsible for helping both poor women and the “coming race,” the dual victims of those who limit access to contraception.

I want to reemphasize the relationship between eugenic assumptions and birth control discourse, because women’s empowerment and disempowerment by aspects of that relationship is central to this project. Rhetorically speaking, negative eugenic ideology serves as a kind of *doxa* (or established assumption) in birth control texts: its validity as a scientific discourse is taken for granted, and arguments are made for the eugenic benefits of birth control, with “racial improvement” as a presumed good. Examining the ideographs that birth control texts share in reference to the complicated power struggles and dangerous implications of eugenics discourse allows us to examine

the ways in which Stopes and Sanger's assumptions about the benefits of eugenics are communicated to and re-imagined by participants in birth control discourse. The double-edged sword of the responsibility that Stopes and Sanger assign to mothers as communicants of the best and worst of their genetic heritage, and the power they invest in mothers, not only makes for an effective persuasive tool, but gives narratives dealing with birth control a powerful source of tension that can only be fully explored by an examination of their underlying assumptions about eugenic motherhood and its societal implications.

Science and Progress as Birth Control Ideologies

If Stopes and Sanger figured themselves and their movement as the heroic saviors of a world in need of contraception, they valorized themselves through their association of birth control discourse with scientific authority. Contraception's centrality to discourse about increases in the overall standard of living that were supposedly becoming available through scientific advancement is a key assumption in Stopes and Sanger's works. Both women highlighted their research and standing in the scientific community by emphasizing their connections to authoritative scientific sources—either by naming experts, like Havelock Ellis, or by citing “one lady doctor with whom I discussed my view” (*Married Love* 45) or “many medical men” (68). In addition, they built their authority by comparing the ways in which their work discussed anatomy and human sexuality with those of less explicit, supposedly “authoritative” scientific texts. Inserting her “Law of Periodicity of Recurrence” into professional discourse on human sexuality, Stopes notes in *Married Love*, “The few statements which are made in general medical

and physiological literature on the subject of sex feeling in women are generally very guarded and vague” (41). She also represents her description of the Law of Periodicity of Recurrence as a “short and simple account” for her lay-audience of a study that “will be given in a scientific publication” (40), trading on her title as “Doctor” and her knowledge of scientific conventions.¹³ Stopes, who earned her doctorate in paleobotany, consistently uses terms from scientific discourse to establish her authority and connect with her lay audience; as Alexander Geppert has argued, she “synthesized a poetical-romantic attitude toward love with a new scientific view of sex” (409).¹⁴ As Geppert argues, Stopes’s “self constructed scientific professionalism” served her as a powerful commercial and persuasive tool throughout her career, gaining her credibility not necessarily with her medical audiences, but with the broader audiences that bought her books, wrote to her at her Mother’s Clinic, and presumably put her advice into practice (432-3).

Identification with the authority of the scientist or psychiatrist, which connotes both immense personal power and distanced, authoritative objectivity, gave Sanger and Stopes a powerful tool for gaining the trust of the movement’s middle-class audiences and donors. Lois Cucullu, writing on literary modernists’ own appropriation of such authority, argues that the early twentieth century is characterized by faith in scientific

¹³ Geppert notes that the title page of *Married Love* lists Stopes’ doctoral degrees without noting that her degrees were in paleobotany rather than medicine (396). However, in the advertising appendix to *Wise Parenthood*, Stopes specifically denies having a medical background, referring to herself as “A Doctor of Science, *not* Medicine” (n.p.).

¹⁴ Interestingly, Stopes herself writes in her “Author’s Note to the Fifth Edition” of *Married Love*, “The ethical, the romantic, the physiological, the frankly practical and economic aspects [of birth control] ...are all of vital importance and are essentially interwoven” (v).

expertise to address even the most personal of human issues: “Experts will produce the knowledges that codify and regulate the new engine of desire, its reign, and its aesthetic expression” (17). One significant example of the role of scientific language in authorizing arguments for birth control can be seen in texts that use the terms “physical” and “physiology” to imply connections between Stopes and Sanger’s ideals and the “official” scientists to whom they often refer. When Sanger claims, “Physically and nervously, the woman of to-day is not fitted to bear children as frequently as was her mother and her mother’s mother” (*Woman* 69), she does not cite a medical source, but her use of “physically” and “nervously” implies an association with biology that validates her claim not only with eugenicists, to whom the phrase “not fitted” would imply an acceptance of human degeneration, but also with readers familiar with recent advances in physical and psychological science. Similarly, in the following passage, Stopes suggests that her knowledge of new developments in psychology makes her analysis of the physical ailments of sex-deprived wives superior to previous work: “The older school of physiologists dealt in methods too crude to realize the physiological results of our thoughts, but it is now well known that anger and bitterness have experimentally recognizable physiological effects, and are injurious to the whole system” (64). Stopes’s subtle insertion of herself into a lineage of scientific experts builds trust among her readership while also distinguishing her own theories from established knowledge, a move which is repeated throughout birth control advocates’ texts. By presenting objective, “scientific” rationales for their political agendas, both authors trade on the

popularity of well-known researchers like Freud, Ellis, and Darwin, appropriating science's invisible ideology of objectivity and human progress for their own work.

The purpose of the ideograph of the scientist in birth control movement rhetoric is to remind readers of the possibilities for broad advancement birth control advocates saw available through family planning. Words like “progress” and “modernity” are some of the most frequently used and flexible ideographs in birth control texts, referring alternately or simultaneously to the perfection of the genetic pool, advocacy for women's rights, advances in medical technology, and increases in the use of contraception. To Stopes and Sanger, the birth control movement represented not only a way to expand individual human freedom through the application of scientific knowledge to the practices of sex and reproduction, but also a radical possibility for a transformed human condition. In a 1935 text called *Marriage in my Time*, Stopes described the societal shift following the publication of *Married Love*: “the main ideas crashed into English society like a bombshell. Its explosively contagious main theme—that woman like man has the same physiological reaction, a reciprocal need for enjoyment and benefit from sex union in marriage distinct from the exercise of maternal functions—made Victorian husbands gasp” (404). Sanger makes the even bolder claim for the effect of birth control discourse on human society in the first chapter of *Woman and the New Race*: “The most far reaching social development of modern times is the revolt of women against sex servitude” (1). The authors' shared view that the birth control movement was paradigmatic of the social progress of Western society in the late 1910s likely seemed inspiringly optimistic to WWI and post-WWI audiences, for whom “physical perfection ,

mental strength, and spiritual progress” (*Woman* 46) were strongly associated with an Allied victory and hope for continued British and American dominance of the world stage.¹⁵

Like protection against racial degeneration, the social revolutions Sanger and Stopes envision resulting from their work depend upon women’s agency and responsibilities. Sanger claims in *Woman and the New Race*, “If we are to make racial progress, this development of womanhood must precede motherhood in every individual woman” (229), and Stopes argues in *Married Love* that “Marriage can never reach its full stature until women possess as much intellectual freedom and freedom of opportunity as do their partners” (95-6). Though Stopes and Sanger’s extremes of idealized and degraded motherhood can be limiting and infantilizing, the power the birth control movement invested in “the modern woman” as a bringer or a measure of social progress provides two strong points of identification for their female audiences. First, such references represent women as subjects as well as the objects in birth control advocacy, offering middle-class women a platform to advocate for and give advice to their working class peers as well as a justification for taking control of their own reproductive lives. Second, the authors’ association of social progress with essentialized versions of the female character reinforces the responsibility the movement placed on women as the

¹⁵ Researchers like Hasian and Richard Soloway have pointed out that nationalist fears of the superiority of German soldiers led to an increase of support for policies to develop the physical and mental strength of young English men and women between the Boer War and WWI. Hasian lists measures including “encouragement of early marriages, the birth of more children, tax inducements, educational bonuses, better housing, expanded medical facilities, and improved prenatal care (46) as some of the steps the English government took to breed an “Imperial Race,” as Stopes would put it.

guardians of family fertility. In *Wise Parenthood*, Stopes claims, “The one to whom the consequences of carelessness are most serious is, of course, the woman; she, therefore, is the one who should exercise the precaution” (27). While contemporary reproductive rights advocates would argue that, ideally, birth control would be the concern of both women and men, particularly in the marriage relationships described in these books, Sanger specifically refutes claims that men have a role in fertility control: “The hard, inescapable fact which we encounter to-day is that man has not only refused any such responsibility, but has individually and collectively sought to prevent woman from obtaining knowledge by which she could assume this responsibility for herself” (*Woman* 96).

Within the society Sanger describes, birth control advocates gave a new and radical power to women by claiming reproductive planning as an issue to be ideologically and concretely managed by female social actors. Though this power clearly had dangerous applications, particularly when middle-class white women exercised it across racial and class lines, it had an emotional resonance even for readers, including non-white women, unmarried women, and working class women, who were not authorized fully to participate in the ideal sexual and social relations described by birth control advocates. In defining “racial maternalism,” McCann notes that much of the advice given to poor or immigrant mothers was based on narrow, Euro-centric conceptions of family life (56). However, as I hope to show in this project, the material *and* ideological implications of birth control advocates’ arguments were potentially applicable in a variety of contexts in which women desired to “obtain knowledge” and “assume responsibility” in regard to

their sexual fulfillment, reproductive health, or romantic and maternal agency—even when those women were not members of Stopes and Sanger’s implied audience of white, middle-class women. If, as McGee claims, the meaning that can be discovered in ideographs comes out “in their concrete history of usage, not in their alleged idea-content” (‘Ideograph’ 10), then the significance of Stopes and Sanger’s assignment of agency to their female readers appears in those readers’ uses and adaptations of their language to the variety of situations that characterized their lives. As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, the power of birth control advocates’ arguments lay not only in their power to inform about and support the proliferation of contraceptive devices themselves, but also in their discursive capacity to alter the way that Stopes and Sanger’s readers understood their own roles as wives, mothers, and sexual beings.

Conclusion: Birth Control Ideographs Revisited

In the 1973 article, “Literature as Equipment for Living,” Kenneth Burke suggests that scholars examine the modes of living enabled by different literary tropes and forms; he argues, “a sociological approach should attempt to provide a reintegrative point of view” (137) that connects literary form and content with the lived experiences and material realities literary authors depict in their work. In this chapter, I have reviewed a series of persuasive flashpoints that appear in Stopes and Sanger’s birth control advocacy texts and are reflected in novels by women written in the years after those texts’ publications, suggesting some ways that the study of birth control movement history can illuminate the modes of living imagined and represented by women authors of the interwar era. The rest of this dissertation does not center on rhetorical paradigms for the

relationships between the literary texts under discussion and Stopes and Sanger's work, but rather integrates this chapter's discussion of ideology, identification, and dissociation in birth control discourse into analyses of literary references to contraception and birth control movement values. Nevertheless, many of the ideographs, identifications, and dissociations identified here will reappear throughout the dissertation as starting places for my analysis of belletristic authors' incorporation and adaptation of birth control advocacy in their work, including the trope of the dying or weakened mother, particularly her position as a "slave" of her fertility or patriarchal culture; discussions of sex that describe women's experiences in particular as "mystical" or "spiritual"; depictions of women's "vitality" as metonymic of the "vitality" of their race or social class; differentiation between "fit" and "unfit" mothers and depictions of "unfit" mothers' guilt about bringing children into the world; use of the terms "physical," "biological," or "physiological" to build a bridge between psychological and medical aspects of sexual and reproductive health; and allusions to "the new," "the future," or "the modern" in connection with fertility control. Almost all of these tropes carried ideological weight within social discourses that pre-existed the publication of Stopes and Sanger's texts; however, the new resonances given to them by their use in the context of the birth control movement reveal the particular pleasures and anxieties that movement highlighted for women in the early twentieth century.

While the birth control movement's agenda is often hailed as a radical departure from previously accepted views on sexuality and reproduction, a close analysis of the ways in which its advocates utilized language connotative of existing value systems can

help illuminate the trajectory of the movement's assimilation into mainstream discourse on women and family life in the twentieth century. In the rest of this dissertation, I will demonstrate that the burgeoning ideology of birth control opened up material and ideological possibilities for middle-class women in particular that have complex, differentiated, but significant resonances across national and cultural borders. Women writers' adoptions and adaptations of the language of the birth control movement play a vital role in the development of that movement's legitimacy and the alteration of attitudes toward sexuality and reproduction during the careers of Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes. However, the authors I discuss interacted with birth control advocates' ideas in ways that can be demonstrated not only in their depictions of women, sexuality, marriage, and fertility, but also in the ways they "talk back" to and re-imagine contraceptive politics, using Stopes and Sanger's rhetoric as a starting point for critiques or extensions of their movement's agenda.

Chapter Two

The Future of Sex: *The Woman Rebel* in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* Saga

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's biography might suggest that she herself was a living embodiment of the rhetorical tropes of the birth control movement. Married at twenty-three, she suffered a complete breakdown in 1885 after the birth of her first and only child, Katherine, which led to periodic mental illness throughout the rest of her life. Janet Beer, analyzing Gilman's autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, calls it "a testament to the thwarting by marriage and motherhood of the potential of the woman who called herself at twenty one 'a philosophic steam-engine'" (56). Though Gilman attained fame as a lecturer and political activist in the years following her separation from her first husband, Walter Stetson, in 1888, she maintained throughout her life that her poor mental health following her post-partum depression held her back from reaching her potential for personal and professional success (Beer 56-7). In addition, Gilman's second marriage was to a first cousin whose "highly developed...brain" was (her doctors feared) too similar to her own for them to produce healthy, "fit" offspring (Lane 225-6); after much consideration and consultation with doctors, Gilman decided she and Houghton were not genetically qualified to have children. Considering her bad experiences with childbearing and her interest in genetics and racial "fitness," it is perhaps surprising that Gilman actually resisted the birth control movement as it gained a political identity in the 1910s; although she advocated smaller families and better breeding, she argued in a 1915 article entitled "Birth Control," "As for needing a 'safe,' free and unlimited indulgence in the exercises of this function [sexual intercourse], I hold

that to be an abnormal condition” (Ceplair 256). Her conviction that the human race in the early twentieth century was dangerously over-sexed placed her at odds with early instantiations of the American birth control movement helmed by Sanger and Emma Goldman, which endorsed free love and the abolition of marriage as well as birth limitation and a fitter citizenry. In her 1915 Utopian saga, *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*, Gilman imagined a perfect society built on reproductive control, but free of sexual intercourse as well as of the class struggle and social revolution Sanger represented at that time.

Despite her antipathy to early birth control politics, however, I argue in this chapter that Gilman’s conservative writings about sex and contraception, particularly *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*, represented not just an aberration but also a substantive intervention in birth control movement discourse. Though Gilman’s magazine, *The Forerunner* (which ran from 1909 to 1916 and was written entirely by herself), engaged more directly with sociologists like Ellen Key, whose arguments about mothering practices ran counter to her own, the birth control movement forms a significant background for her fiction and non-fiction writings during those years, and in *Herland* in particular she engages with that movement in direct and indirect discussions of reproductive politics. I argue also that in her alternate model for reproductive control, Gilman not only responded to, but influenced that movement. As politically radical fugitive Margaret Sanger sought material and institutional support for her movement in the late 1910s and early 1920s, she came to adopt a form of women’s health advocacy that mirrored Gilman’s own in its focus on monogamous marriage and social and genetic

“hygiene.” This convergence is a telling indication that although Sanger’s public advocacy of contraception influenced feminist writers’ representations of sexuality and motherhood in the early twentieth century, those writers’ uses and adaptations of birth control rhetoric also influenced the movement often thought of solely as the product of Sanger’s philosophy and experiences. While Sanger may have influenced Gilman, Gilman just as importantly (and, given Sanger’s status, perhaps more consequentially for the actual sexual lives of women) influenced Sanger. The Herland novels offer a version of middle-class female power that elevates motherhood but subordinates sexual pleasure, a model Sanger used to build a powerful international movement around birth control in the 1920s.

The Woman Rebel and Herland: Initial Points of Contact

Margaret Sanger and Charlotte Perkins Gilman may have first come into contact in 1914, when Sanger addressed the women’s group The Heterodoxy Club, of which Gilman was a member (Long 172). The meeting between the established feminist Club members and the radical socialist Sanger appears to have gone poorly, perhaps because of Sanger’s controversial personal life and lack of medical credentials, and perhaps, as she later argued, because the Club was focused narrowly on suffrage issues at the time (McClearey 191). Following this rocky start, however, Gilman and Sanger sustained a long-standing professional relationship, despite their occasional criticism of one another in letters and publications. In 1916, Gilman spoke in support of Sanger at a dinner the National Birth Control League (Mary Ware Dennett’s pro-birth control association) held to show solidarity with Sanger following her arrest under the Comstock Laws (Long

192). In later years, Sanger included contributions from Gilman in the *Birth Control Review*, and Lisa A. Long has noted that Gilman's last public appearance, in January 1934, was at the Sanger-organized American Conference on Birth Control and National Recovery (192).

Scholars of "first wave" feminist discourse have addressed Gilman and Sanger's disparate views as examples of the tension within the fractured early twentieth-century feminist movement; however, their influence on each other is under-examined. In one of the very few articles that closely examines Gilman's work in the context of Sanger's, Long suggests that even in 1914, Sanger and Gilman had common ground on which to build an alliance within that movement: both published independent periodicals focused on women's political issues (Gilman's *The Forerunner* was published from 1909 to 1916, while Sanger's *The Woman Rebel* went through seven issues in 1914); both were concerned with issues of public health and over-population; both believed strongly that human progress depended on the development of biological and social evolution; and both were interested in reproductive control (173). She argues that their failure to connect personally and professionally represents a missed opportunity for Sanger as she attempted to gain support for birth control. Long's perspective, however, may overemphasize Sanger's openness to Gilman's feminist perspective in 1914, and particularly her commitment to eugenic discourse at that time. Long argues, "...both Sanger and Gilman agreed that overpopulation, particularly the unchecked reproduction of the 'unfit,' could cause the ruin of America." She uses as evidence for her point a quotation from Sanger's magazine the *Woman Rebel* that states, "propagation of

[America's] degenerate, imbecile, and criminal should be prevented" (182). However, the quotation, seemingly attributed to Sanger, actually appeared *The Woman Rebel* not as the view of Sanger or one of her colleagues, but as part of a reprint of a speech on birth limitation from American Medical Association president Abraham Jacobi. Sanger cites Jacobi to contrast institutional acceptance of doctors' public discussion of reproductive issues with the censorship and silencing the *Woman Rebel* was undergoing (Baskin "Opinions" 51),¹⁶ identifying herself *against* the medical and legal establishments. On the other hand, in an article in the May 1914 issue of *The Woman Rebel*, Sanger aligns Gilman with such establishments, citing Gilman's statement calling war "a disgrace to our civilization" as obtuse in the face of the systematic violence of capitalism: "The workers are just beginning to realize that civilization is war. ... Rockefeller may organize the slaughter of men, women and children and go to Church the following Sunday..." (Baskin "Civilization" 20). Clearly, a closer reading of the *Woman Rebel* reveals that the superficial similarities between Gilman and Sanger in 1914 must be seen as secondary to their different relationships to mainstream feminism and their different levels of commitment to radical political thought, differences which were clearly paramount in Sanger's mind, at least, during this period.

Taking Long's elision of this antagonism between the two women as a revealing starting point, I will refrain from searching, as she does, for missed opportunities for connection between Gilman and Sanger, and will instead put into question not Sanger's

¹⁶ *The Woman Rebel* was seized by the U.S. Post Office throughout its short life because it advocated contraception and open rebellion against capitalism, including applauding Marie Ganz's attempt to assassinate John D. Rockefeller (Katz 70-1).

initial disharmony with Gilman, but her eventual adoption of hierarchies and rhetorical tactics that Gilman had previously utilized to discuss reproduction. Examining both women's work from the vantage point of their contributions to early twentieth-century birth control discourse, I will show that the two women negotiated the claims of feminism and eugenics on that discourse in very different ways in 1914 and 1915, with Gilman appearing reactionary in her ideals of sexual morality, eugenicist and even racist in her approach to population control, and out of step with the broad-based appeals to the working class Sanger promoted in *The Woman Rebel*. Rather than adapting to or being eclipsed by the seemingly more progressive birth control politics espoused by Sanger, however, Gilman's more middle-class focused, social-engineering oriented arguments for reproductive control in fact became significant contributions to birth control rhetoric, and offered a groundwork for the direction in which Sanger led the movement only a few years after the publication of Gilman's Herland saga.

Herland and *With Her in Ourland*, published in book form by Pantheon Press in 1979 and Greenwood Press in 1997, respectively, were first published serially in Gilman's periodical, *The Forerunner*. The narrative of *Herland* takes the concept of women's control over reproduction to a science-fiction-esque extreme. Upon "discovering" a land populated entirely by women, the novel's narrator Vandyck Jennings and his companions Terry and Jeff imagine that there must be men somewhere, to facilitate mating. When they learn enough of the Herland language to ask their captors/tutors about the nation's history, they discover their mistake: the race of Herlanders breed through parthenogenesis, each woman conceiving a child on her own

following “a period of utter exaltation” (70). The men go on to discover through their interactions with Herland residents that the women have set up a superior society founded upon the ideals of eugenic breeding, population control, and socialist motherhood. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how *Herland* and its sequel, *With Her in Ourland*, attempt to establish an alternative paradigm for birth control politics by focusing on the problems of unchecked reproduction—overpopulation, inequality, poverty, and racial “unfitness”—while offering abstinence from sex, rather than sexual freedom with assistance from contraceptives, as the solution to women’s reproductive dilemma. By reestablishing contraceptive politics as the central concern of *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*, I will provide a new reading of those texts that demonstrates the pervasiveness of intra-gender conflict in Gilman’s narratives about the “battle between the sexes.” In these books, Gilman uses the rhetorical techniques of identification and dissociation to lay out what she considers correct attitudes for women regarding sexuality and reproduction; here, I will show how the webs of identification and dissociation she proposes depict Sanger’s ideals of sexual morality, as laid out in *The Woman Rebel*, as undermining the ideals of progressivism and feminism that Gilman advocates. I will also demonstrate, however, that Gilman’s ideas, though apparently an aberrant contribution to birth control history, anticipated the direction Sanger would take to bring the birth control movement into mainstream American culture.

Herland’s emphasis on a dichotomy between sex and reproduction reacted against the radical birth control rhetoric exemplified in *The Woman Rebel*, which began publication a year or so before the serialization of *Herland* and maintained an attitude

about mainstream feminism distinctly at odds with Gilman's work. *The Woman Rebel* overtly identified with the working class against capitalism and the "bourgeoisie," a category into which the journal places Gilman and many of her feminist contemporaries. In one issue, prominent feminists of the day are described with scathing sarcasm, the brunt of which is reserved for Gilman:

Floyd Dell has evidently done his best to make his ten representative feminist world builders as harmless as possible. ... Among the women whom the author crowns with the grace of his courteous rhetoric are Ellen Key, Margaret D. Robins, Beatrice Webb, Olive Schreiner, Isadora Duncan, Emmeline Pankhurst (not Christabel or Sylvia), Jane Addams, and of course, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. That these eight are all feminists, none will deny. That any of them are world builders is a debatable question. (Baskin "World Builders?" 15)

On her part, Gilman opposed *The Woman Rebel's* advocacy of "free love" and sexual pleasure for women (Long 182). While writers for *The Woman Rebel* advocated the abolition of marriage laws (Baskin "Marriage" 16) and railed against "the pretense called monogamy" and its "crushing out of spontaneity as to the exercise of any instinct" (Baskin "Marriage" 31), Gilman theorized about the end of sex rather than the end of marriage, believing that humans could become "highly evolved" enough to mate only

during a constricted yearly season (Ceplair 253).¹⁷ Though they held similar stances on a number of other issues (Long 173), the differences between Sanger's and Gilman's views on issues of economics and women's sexuality in 1915 constituted for both women an insuperable divide between their respective work on woman's movement and birth control issues.

The *Woman Rebel*, though not entirely written by Sanger, reflected her views and agenda in every article; Alex Baskin, editor of the 1976 Archives of Social History edition collecting all of its issues, notes, "Though [Sanger] invited others to contribute articles to the *Woman Rebel*, she assumed the full responsibility for determining editorial policy.... Recalling that period, she wrote, 'I worked day and night to make it as red and flaming as possible'" (i). Sanger's tone, however, would change significantly as her movement acquired connections with institutional structures such as the medical establishment and the Eugenics Society. Though she continued to see herself as a "woman rebel" and a controversial figure, she came to reject "red and flaming" birth control advocacy, dismissing the *Woman Rebel* as a "sass box" (Baskin ix) and embracing a top-down model for political change that resonated more with Gilman's ideals of an orderly, "socially hygienic" future for women's and reproductive rights movements than with her previous gestures of solidarity with striking workers. The marked change in tone of Margaret Sanger's rhetoric after her arrest and trial in 1916 is usually attributed to her experiences during her exile in England. In his 1970 biography

¹⁷ Significantly, this argument is put forward in, among other contexts, a 1915 article in Gilman's *Forerunner* entitled "Birth Control," included in Ceplair's edition of Gilman's non-fiction writing.

of Sanger, *Birth Control in America*, David Kennedy argues (condescendingly) that her relationship with Havelock Ellis gave her an ideological framework for an untenably scattered radical philosophy: “With Havelock Ellis’s guidance, Margaret Sanger began to shape the ideas she had assimilated into a systematic, even philosophic, justification for birth control. Her thought was finally acquiring the ideological structure it had so conspicuously and painfully lacked” (31). Other scholars, including Linda Gordon, have noted that Ellis’ influence seems to have made Sanger more politically conservative, and in particular more dedicated to questions of “racial betterment” as part of the argument for birth control (Gordon 228).

However, as Carole McCann has convincingly argued in *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945* (1994), Sanger’s shifting political positions were probably as much the result of her attempts to gain adherents to her cause as of her changing personal opinions. As McCann argues, the advocates presumably most receptive to Sanger’s message were middle-class feminists, whose ideological and organizational development chronologically paralleled that of the birth control movement.¹⁸ In this analysis, I take as given McCann’s claim that Sanger worked in the late 1910s and 1920s to “inscribe birth control within women’s rights discourse and organizational networks” (26), represented in part by Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself, in contrast to her earlier

¹⁸ McCann’s chapter, “Birth Control and Feminism” (23-58), argues that Sanger ultimately failed to attract a large body of political feminists to her cause, in part because of feminist groups’ ongoing anxiety about the potential/historical connection between birth control and “free love”; however, my argument focuses not on the success or failure of Sanger’s attempt, but on her use of tropes from Gilman’s writing as part of her “inscription” of birth control rhetoric into the discourse surrounding women’s rights.

efforts to distance herself from such networks. More important than Sanger's shift from anti- to pro-marriage rhetoric in her discourse about birth control may be her shift to a strong, if complicated, pro-eugenics stance. In the last sections of this chapter, I will closely examine Gilman's pro-feminist, pro-eugenics stance as a potential model for Sanger's later adherence to this apparently more politically tenable model for birth control discourse. I will explore the similarities between Gilman's rhetoric in *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland* and later manifestations of Sanger's birth control movement rhetoric, suggesting that just as Sanger's writing offered some of the impetus for Gilman's depictions of reproductive and sexual control in *Herland*, Gilman's re-casting of her reproductive politics may have influenced Sanger's revision of her social ideals as she transitioned from *The Woman Rebel* to the *Birth Control Review* and from anarchic political rebellion to a middle-class, welfare feminist model of "good works" and political commentary.

"Strange and Terrible Woman Land": Women in/and Control in *Herland*

Margaret Sanger claimed that she coined the phrase "birth control" in 1914 at the same time she conceived the idea for *The Woman Rebel* (Sanger *Margaret* 108). The new term of Sanger's can be seen as metonymic of her new movement as a whole, in that it refers not only to contraception but also to an ideal of women's control over their sexual and reproductive selves, and to an ideology that celebrates women's control and urges them to use it to achieve larger social goals (including the "control" of other women less

“fit” to “control” themselves).¹⁹ As *The Woman Rebel* demonstrates, Sanger’s new movement, by insisting on women’s especial responsibility to limit their childbearing, implied a broad familial and social authority for women that challenged the dominance of men not only in the bedroom, but over domestic and political life. A short declaration entitled “The First Right” in the second issue of *The Woman Rebel* demonstrates the implied contradiction between male power (familial or clerical) and women’s reproductive responsibilities: “Only a ridiculous idea of love and of the act of reproduction, an idea handed down from the infamous Christian religion, could have led women to forget that she alone has the right to decide [when to become a mother]” (Baskin “The First Right” 10). The comprehensiveness of Sanger’s notion of female control over reproduction can also be seen in an article that exhorts working-class women to protest laws that prevent them from obtaining information about contraception: “Let us, WOMEN OF THE WORKING CLASS, transvalue the conception of the words ‘decent’ and ‘indecent.’ ... Anything that will enlighten the working-woman—the woman who needs it most—let us welcome it, and work for it, and spread light. And let us do it by ALL MEANS” (Baskin “Indecency vs. Decency” 34, emphasis in original). Sanger’s portrayal of women’s abilities and responsibilities not only to protect their

¹⁹ The rhetorical effects of the term “birth control” on the movement Sanger and Stopes established is a fascinating under-explored question. In a very brief article in *Lancet*, Lesley Hall makes some suggestions about the shift the term precipitated in public discourse about birth control: “...terms such as ‘precautionary means’ and ‘prudential limitation’ struck a similarly dour note of gloomy forethought, possibly to counter the prevalent belief that contraception was all about self-indulgence. A radical shift came with the advent of the term ‘birth control’ ... This idea of control over reproduction as a positive act was further emphasised by British campaigner Marie Stopes” (Hall 805).

bodies against assault but also to remake society according to their needs goes beyond the goals of nineteenth-century Voluntary Motherhood to a comprehensive ideology that sees women's control as a value not only to the individual woman, but also to the (remade) social order.

The notion of women in control is one that Gilman also adopts as the dominant theme in the Herland novels. When Van, Jeff, and Terry envision the “woman land” they are going to explore, they can imagine women as rulers—Van speculates that the country is organized “on a sort of matriarchal principle” (7)—but they cannot fathom the degree of control that the Herlanders exercise over their environment and society. From above, during the “geographical expedition” the men take by plane, Herland is “a land in a state of perfect cultivation...a land that looked like an enormous park, only it was even more evidently an enormous garden” (11). The men eventually discover that the Herland women have seeded every part of their country with fruit-producing plants, sometimes of their original breeding: “In the case of one tree, in which they took especial pride, it had originally no fruit at all—that is, none humanly edible—yet it was so beautiful they wished to keep it. For nine hundred years they had experimented, and now showed us this particularly graceful tree, with a profuse crop of nutritious seeds” (79). The Herlanders are proselytizers of order and efficiency; as Kristin Carter-Sanborn has pointed out, their “true nature is not only expressed in their orderly genes, and their orderly behavior, but in the impulse to organize those around them” (Carter-Sanborn 21). Van mentally compares

their efforts at education to the innovations of Maria Montessori (106),²⁰ but quickly realizes that the comprehensiveness of their system far exceeds that of the American and European models. Gilman's images directly contrast the inefficiencies and failures of male-dominated Western society as she knew it with the Herlanders' complete, efficient, and productive control over their environment, emphasizing women's abilities not only as political leaders, but also self-actualized managers of all aspects of life.

Of course, the aspect of life in which the Herlanders' total control is most striking is their adaptive reproduction. After finding that the Herlanders can not only conceive children by will alone, but also prevent conception when their nation becomes overcrowded, Van expresses his admiration of women's control over their biology:

You see, they were Mothers, not in our sense of helpless involuntary fecundity, forced to fill and overflow the land, and then see their children suffer, sin, and die, fighting horribly with one another; but in the sense of Conscious Makers of People. Mother-love with them was not a brute passion, a mere 'instinct,' a wholly personal feeling; it was—a religion.

(68)

²⁰ The "Montessori" theory of education was created in the late nineteenth century by Maria Montessori; it emphasizes early childhood education, the integration of physical activity and conventional study, and child-directed learning models, much like the system described in *Herland*. Gilman may have come into contact with Maria Montessori at the 1899 International Council of Women in London, where both were speakers (Hill 269), and she was probably familiar with the Ferrar Center, a school founded in part on Montessori's research in New York in 1911 by Emma Goldman and her anarchist colleagues, which enrolled Sanger's son Stuart as one of its first students.

Written while the Great War raged in Europe, these words expressed the frustration that many radical women, including Sanger, Goldman, Olive Schreiner and others, were expressing with women's roles as bearers of future soldiers. In the first issue of the *Woman Rebel*, Emma Goldman writes, "The defenders of authority dread the advent of a free motherhood lest it rob them of their prey. Who would fight wars?" She goes on, however, to blame marriage for women's relegation to "indiscriminate breeders": "The race must be preserved, though women be degraded to a mere machine,—and the marriage institution is our only safety valve against the pernicious sex-awakening of women" (Baskin "Love and Marriage" 3). Gilman's depiction of sexless motherhood as a solution to overpopulation and war sharply distinguishes her definition of reproductive control from this "free motherhood." Instead of advocating technology to extend the possibilities for women's sexual and reproductive choice, *Herland* locates the idea of control in women's bodies, arguing that women should and can carefully regulate their sexual and reproductive functions to achieve her ideal of motherhood/womanhood.

The reverence for "Mothers" and "Mother-love" expressed in the "Conscious Makers of People" passage is a constant theme in the novel, which consistently emphasizes the supreme importance of motherhood as a calling and an experience for women. However, Gilman strongly rejects the model of motherhood she sees as common in her own era and nation, specifically the "helpless involuntary" nature of "our" motherhood, narrowing her criticism to focus on women's lack of agency in their reproductive and sexual lives. The contrast between the "free choice" experienced by the Herlanders and the involuntary motherhood Gilman perceives in her own society is

further emphasized in the phrase “forced to fill and overfill the land,” which reminds the reader of the feminist issue of marital rape (and foreshadows the attempted rape by Terry of his Herland wife Alima, which closes the plot of *Herland*). This emphasis on women’s freedom *from* sexual advances recalls principles of the Victorian Voluntary Motherhood movement, which agitated for women’s right to refuse to have sex with their husbands, though the emphasis on women’s roles in overpopulation (with its results of overpopulation and war) ties the argument to Sanger’s and Goldman’s rhetoric.

Gilman’s use of the phrase “Conscious Makers of People” in this passage is particularly relevant to this discussion because the technological innovation implied in the phrase emphasizes the eugenic element of Gilman’s ideal motherhood, a line of reasoning that was obscured in early iterations of birth control rhetoric like *The Woman Rebel*. The description of reproduction as “conscious making” also hints at another suggestive contrast between her rhetoric and *The Woman Rebel*’s, namely, the distance that Gilman places between sex and motherhood, identifying the former with a forceful, mindless male civilization governed by “mere instinct,” and the latter with the rational, functional female-dominated model she establishes in the text. The following 1914 quotation from *Woman Rebel* contributor Emma Goldman offers an interesting parallel to Gilman’s argument about “helpless, involuntary mothers”: “Woman no longer wants to be a party to the production of a race of sickly, feeble, decrepit, wretched human beings...Instead she desires fewer and better children, begotten and reared in love and through free choice” (3). While Goldman and Gilman use similar language and have similar overall goals for birth control and women’s reproductive rights, *Herland* tends to

foreground the subtle but significant differences in their perspectives. For example, Gilman's designation of the Herlanders as "Conscious Makers of People" seems in line with Goldman's emphasis on "free choice," but erases Goldman's implied connection between "free choice" and "begotten and reared in love," removing sexual desire from the discourse on birth control.

The "her-story" of the advent of parthenogenesis in *Herland* is interesting both for its feminist overtones and for its connections to Gilman's study of evolution, a study which explored the limits of human control over the natural world (Hausman 495). The Herlanders are descendants of "a polygamous people, and a slave holding people" (*Herland* 55) who lived in a broad valley but were embroiled in territorial conflict. Two thousand years before the time *Herland* takes place, all the free men of their tribe went on a war expedition and were all walled outside the country by a giant earthquake. Inside the country, the slave population revolted, and killed many of the remaining women; however, as Van puts it, "this succession of misfortunes was too much for these infuriated virgins. There were many of them, and but few of these would-be masters, so the young women, instead of submitting, rose in sheer desperation and slew their brutal conquerors" (55). Although they had protected their bodies from the rebellious slaves with true "Voluntary Motherhood" spirit, with only females left alive, the Herlanders assumed their culture was at an end, until ten years after the demise of the men, "the miracle happened—one of these young women bore a child" (56).

Gilman suggests that the "Queen-Priestess-Mother" of Herland underwent a genetic mutation enabling virgin birth, as she was able to pass her ability on to her five

daughters, and they to each of their families of five daughters (56). Such a mutation process reflects Gilman's understanding of evolution, influenced by Lamarckian ideas that mutation occurs over a short period of time and organisms' "acquired characteristics" (like increased intelligence, or an adaptive breeding strategy) can be passed from parent to offspring. In a 1998 analysis of *Herland*, Bernice L. Hausman states that Gilman wrote "in order to convince her readers that humans could be agents in the process of *natural* selection" (498). The Herlanders's motives for eventually limiting their pregnancies also reveal Gilman's preoccupations with the evolution of the human species. Of particular importance in Van's summary of Herland's history is "...the problem of 'the pressure of population.'" Gilman's placement of the phrase "the pressure of population" in quotation marks may be meant to suggest that Van is using a term from his sociology studies, most likely from the Malthusian discourse important to Gilman's as well as Sanger's perspectives on population and birth control. Clearly, the Herlanders themselves do not use the language of evolution or have reference to Lamarck's or Malthus's ideas. However, through a combination of attention to their own desires and needs and awareness of social pressures and issues, they seize control of their evolutionary destiny, achieving the kind of comprehensive reform Gilman advocates as the natural direction of human development.

While *Herland* espouses a doctrine of progressivist control on a macro-level, commenting on the untapped potential of human evolution and collective social improvement, Gilman strongly emphasizes individual control, particularly regarding sexual desire, its suppression, and the control of reproduction. The degree to which the

ideal of individual agency governs Gilman's representations of women's sexuality can be seen in the process by which Herland women actually become pregnant; Van's Herland "tutor" Somel explains, "before a child comes to one of us there is a period of utter exaltation—the whole being is uplifted and filled with a concentrated desire for that child." However, Somel also expounds on prevention of motherhood: "Often, our young women, those to whom motherhood had not yet come, would voluntarily defer it" by suppressing their "utter exaltation" through service to the community (70). The degree to which Herland women control their reproduction is high—not only do they conceive children purely through their own desires, but they also recognize and resist those desires (and sacrifice the pleasure of conception as well as of motherhood) in order to avoid overpopulation.

The feeling of "utter exaltation" that the Herlanders feel before they conceive a child obviously parallels a sexual orgasm that might precede a conventional conception (Hudak 470). Thus, Gilman's representation of this experience as initially positive for both the woman and the community (when the Herland population was in decline), then eventually positive for the woman but *negative* for the community seems to be an obvious metaphor for the varying value she finds in sexual intercourse. Gilman associates sex with female and male pleasure, but emphasizes that sex is a "lower" pleasure, to be enjoyed sparingly: "The human animal manifests an excess in sex-attraction which not only injures the race through its morbid action on the natural processes of reproduction, but which injures the happiness of the individual through its morbid reaction on his own desires" (*Women and Economics* 31). Unlike birth control advocates, whose goal is to

maintain (or increase) current “levels” of sexual pleasure while decreasing population growth, Gilman has the Herlanders respond to the intrusion of social concerns into their personal fulfillment by placing the community above the pleasurable experience of conception, and exercising the control they have over their bodies to deny themselves both motherhood and the pleasure of (auto)eroticism. The self-abnegation inherent to Gilman’s form of birth control can be seen in the methods Herlanders use to get themselves under control when they sense they are about to experience exaltation: “When that deep inner demand for a child began to be felt she would deliberately engage in the most active work, physical and mental; and even more important, would solace her longing by the direct care and service of the babies we already had” (70). The image of hard-working young women actively serving the community in order to stave off sexual temptation (sublimated through reproductive temptation) reflects Gilman’s alternate paradigm for women’s fulfillment, to be obtained collectively rather than personally, and through employment rather than physical pleasure.²¹

Therefore, Gilman uses the idea of female control, particularly over one’s body, in revolutionary and all-encompassing ways that recall Sanger’s advocacy for women’s

²¹ Gilman’s description of the Herlanders’ establishing control over the potentially erotic experience of conception by working for the community strongly resembles the Freudian theory of sublimation. Research on Gilman and Freud emphasizes her critique of his “androcentric” theories, which were at odds with her belief that strict sex-selection by females is the appropriate basis for human evolution. In a 2004 article Mary M. Moynihan notes that “Freudian theory in Gilman’s view could only lead to the deterioration of the human race” (206). Gilman’s use of sublimation may be, however, a point of convergence with Freudians, who considered it a useful tool for controlling the impulses of the “id.” Her ideal of the complete repression of such feelings, however, obviously contradicts mainstream psychoanalytic discourse of the early 1900’s, which generally held sexual experience as necessary for normal human life.

ability to transform society. However, while Sanger in *The Woman Rebel* directs her paradigm for “birth control” outwards, urging women to control the “outside forces” of reproduction that hamper their personal fulfillment through healthy sex lives, Gilman perceives control as an inward-looking process and visualizes the ideal woman as sublimating her sexual and reproductive pleasure to the needs of the community, in an immediate as well as a broad, evolutionary sense. Though the sexual frustration of the men in *Herland* eventually challenges the Herlanders’ control over their bodies (as I will discuss in the next section), the conflict that Gilman suggests in her depiction of the parthogenesis of Herland is between two woman-centered ideas of the relationship between reproduction and social change. Without mentioning sex explicitly, Gilman uses *Herland’s* unique alternate universe, a universe of women who maintain a systematic, anti-sexual control of their bodies, their community, and their entire race to undermine the “free love” implications of *The Woman Rebel’s* pro-contraception advocacy.

“We’ll Teach ‘Em”: Marriage in *Herland*

Herland, as Van, Terry, and Jeff find it, is a land of motherhood without marriage, but not “single motherhood” in the way that Gilman’s contemporaries and twenty-first readers would understand it. In fact, what Gilman imagines in *Herland* is a system of shared child-rearing she outlined and repeatedly advocated in her non-fiction writing. Her “Statement of Purposes” in the first issue of *The Forerunner* contains the following agenda “As to Children”:

That the critical period of babyhood and early childhood is precisely the most important in our whole lives.

That at present this period is incompetently managed by mothers and servants.

That babies and little children should be placed in the most carefully prepared cultural conditions, and in the care of the highest grade of specially talented, trained, and experienced teachers.

That such conditions and such care require the grouping of little children in specially arranged houses during those hours of the daytime the mother is at work. (Ceplair 198-9)

In several articles over the course of *The Forerunner*, Gilman defends her stance on cooperative mothering, insisting that specially talented and trained caregivers are able to give better care to babies and toddlers than mothers, who offer only the “personal function” (*Herland* 88). The Herland mothers provide a laboratory for her ideas, and their success with their offspring is the aspect of Herland life that most convinces Van of its superiority to “ourland”: “It was the eager happiness of the children and young people which first made me see the folly of that common notion of ours—that if life was smooth and happy, people would not enjoy it. ... As I looked into these methods and compared them with our own, my strange uncomfortable sense of race-humility grew apace” (103-4). Van is made aware of the deficiencies of his society’s care for children, a care that rests on the system of marriage and “personal” motherhood, rather than on the public child-training of Gilman’s ideals.

Gilman’s perception of these deficiencies was informed by her own experiences with “personal” motherhood, which were not, in general, a success. Having been

abandoned by Charlotte's father, Frederic Beecher Perkins, shortly after Charlotte's birth, her mother, Mary Perkins, tried to make Charlotte as little dependent on human affection as possible, refusing to hold or caress her child unless she was asleep and preventing her from forming close friendships with other children (Lane 39, 53). As a mother herself, Charlotte created a national scandal by sending her daughter Katharine to be raised by her ex-husband and his wife when Katharine was nine years old. The editorial board of the *San Francisco Examiner* echoed other West and East Coast papers in its condemnation of her, published on Christmas Day 1892: "There are not many women, fortunately for humanity, who agree with Mrs. Stetson that any 'work,' literary, philanthropic, or political, is higher than that of being a good wife and mother" (quoted in Lane 170). Besides the embarrassment of the negative publicity surrounding her divorce and custody arrangements, Gilman's post-partum depression contributed to the difficulties motherhood presented her with. However, as a writer she tended to praise, rather than critique, mothers and motherhood, elevating her concepts of communal mothering and the positive influence of mothers on the human species to a kind of "Maternal Pantheism" in her later years (Gilbert and Gubar 205). Gilman's real-life experience of motherhood can be seen as approaching her Herland ideal in that in letters she addressed Walter Stetson's second wife, her close friend Grace Ellery Channing, as "dear Mother of my child," "heavenly-wise with children" and apparently tried to maintain a friendly, communal attitude toward hers, Walter's, and Grace's unusual co-parenting of Katherine (Lane 152-3). However, the bitterness that Katherine felt about being abandoned by her mother (308), and the resentment Grace (an author herself) expressed as a substitute

parent during Charlotte's lecture tours (Davis 11) show the limitations of even an enlightened and non-traditional "personal motherhood," when compared to the truly egalitarian communal mothering Gilman idealized in her utopian fiction.

Given Gilman's continued insistence on such communal parenting practices, however, why does Gilman end *Herland* with her three heroes' quite personal marriages, rather than their absorption into the socialist ethos of Herland mothering? This question looms large in critical evaluations of the text. David Bleich's stringent 1989 critique of Gilman emphasizes the ways in which *Herland* conforms to the ideological limitations of utopian novels:

Then as an aspect of [utopian] ideology comes the axiom of what Adrienne Rich has called compulsory heterosexuality. In *Herland* it takes the form: regardless of what history women on their own have developed, regardless of how long that history has functioned peacefully and successfully, heterosexual love necessarily represents an enrichment of life for the women. (22)

The women of Herland quite literally describe the marriages between Van, Jeff, and Terry and their respective partners, Ellador, Celis, and Alima, as an "enrichment" of the nation's life. Van's tutor Somel whispers to him at the triple wedding ceremony, "...it is the dawn of a new era. You don't know how much you mean to us. It is not only Fatherhood—that marvelous dual parentage to which we are strangers—the miracle of union in life-giving—but it is Brotherhood" (119). Two factors, however, constrict a straightforward reading of the marriages in *Herland* as a fulfillment of the kind of ideal

male/female union Somel seems to describe and Bleich seems to assume: first, the Herland women eventually realize they have an over-idealized view of the “bi-sexual” “ourland,” and decide they will continue to remain withdrawn from it; and second, Van’s, Jeff’s, and Terry’s marriages are celibate, making Brotherhood, and *not* Fatherhood (or what we would generally see as “heterosexual love”), the operative social relation within them.

Though Gilman never names sex explicitly in *Herland*, and even depicts Terry’s attempted rape of his wife Alima with only a set of ellipses (*Herland* 132), the conflict between the husbands and wives in the last two chapters of the book centers on the question of whether the three marriages will be consummated. Van acknowledges the uniqueness of their positions as married men in a woman-dominated society: “The differences in the education of the average man and woman are great enough, but the trouble they make is not mostly for the man ... The woman may have imagined the conditions of married life to be different; but what she imagined, was ignorant of, or might have preferred, did not seriously matter” (121). What the men find, upon their marriages, is not only that Ellador, Celis, and Alima have no plans to have sex with them, but also that they are not interested in sharing private rooms with their husbands (125), taking their husbands’ names, or giving up their jobs as foresters (118). The wives expect the community focus that governs the Herlanders’ experiences as mothers to extend to their marriages, while the husbands find themselves uncomfortable with the public status of their ongoing relationships, mostly because there is little space or time for seduction and romance in these partnerships.

Van's ruminations on men's and women's different understandings of marriage and Terry's violent sexual frustration seem to indicate that *Herland* depicts a stereotypical battle between the sexes over sexual expectations. Kathleen Margaret Lant correctly notes that "Gilman renders men, even her sympathetic male characters, as bestial, predatory, and rapacious, and she depicts women as virtuous, determined, and sexually inexperienced" (299). However, despite this polarity in Gilman's representations of the sexes, I believe that the implied argument regarding sex within marriage in *Herland* is not between Van and Ellador, but between Gilman the sociologist and a perceived *female* threat to her ideals for human sexual behavior. Gilman's depiction of Van's and Ellador's conflict over their sex life seems to ask her readers to choose between identifying with the de-sexualized, independent Herland woman and the "typical" woman Van associates with romance and sexuality. The dichotomies Gilman sets up in this section between Herland women and "ourland" women, between sex and love, and between human progress and "indulgence," all reveal her preoccupation with the pro-sex rhetoric of free love and birth control advocates.

The threat that arguments in favor of "free love" posed to Gilman is evident in her statement "On Marriage" in the first issue of *The Forerunner*: "That monogamous marriage is the best for humanity as for many of the higher animals and birds; and that its permanence and happiness will be established by the normal progress of women" (Ceplair 199). Interestingly, both Gilman and Sanger use scientific discourse, including references to biology and chemistry, to argue for the universal applicability of their perspectives on sexuality, and both even base part of their authority on their

interpretations of the mating habits of non-human animals. Gilman's biological arguments in favor of limiting "sex-indulgence," articulated in her 1898 *Women and Economics*, pre-dated Sanger's birth control writing; however, her re-articulation of those ideas in *Herland*, a utopian narrative focused on reproduction, in 1915, indicates that she was particularly invested in the relationship between sex, marriage, and motherhood at this point, perhaps because of the traction Sanger's ideas were gaining in feminist and socialist circles.²² The other clearly significant correlation between Sanger's and Gilman's ideals is that both conflated the politics of sex with the politics of motherhood, appealing to their audience's concerns about the health and economic status of children in making their case for an altered cultural paradigm for male-female sexual relations.

First of all, Gilman's portrayals of male-female relationships demonstrate her perception of an inverse relationship between "sex indulgence" and true romantic fulfillment. Van and Ellador's conversations about their potential sex lives not only reveal their different levels of sexual interest in each other, but also suggest that there are degrees of marital happiness available to couples in "ourland," which are affected by the couples' attitudes about sex "indulgence." In the naïve tone of that characterizes many of her questions about "ourland" (and makes her an effective rhetorical tool for Gilman's challenges to "ourland" practices) Ellador asks Van, "'Among your people do you find high and lasting affection appearing in proportion to this [sex] indulgence?'" His

²² I have not yet been able to look at Sanger's and Gilman's correspondence for further evidence that they had each other in mind as they wrote in the late 1910s and early 1920s; however, Gilman's article "Birth Control" in the July 1915 *Forerunner* is evidence that she not only was aware of Sanger's movement, but was interested in influencing it with her own more moderate views on sexuality.

responding comment to the reader, “It is a very awkward thing, sometimes, to have a logical mind” (*Herland* 126), reminds *Herland’s* readers that Van narrates from a scientific, authorially sanctioned perspective, while also implying that if one has “a logical mind,” one knows that sex “indulgence” leads to the reverse of “high and lasting affection,” and instead is associated with “low” or temporary relationships. The identification built with Gilman’s readers at this moment affirms those who do not “indulge in” or enjoy sex, whether within marriage or without, while shaming readers who do.

Gilman’s particular insistence on dividing *women* into categories of worthy (non-sexual) and less worthy (sexual) is evident elsewhere in this section of *Herland*. Van describes his relationship with Ellador and the sexual temptation she represents by remarking, “It made me feel as, one might imagine, a man might feel who loved a goddess,” but he quickly modifies the statement: “not a Venus, though!” (126). Though the obvious, humorous interpretation of this metaphor is that Ellador, unlike Venus, repels Van’s sexual advances, the value of Ellador *over* “a Venus” is clear. Ultimately, Ellador silences Van with a scathing announcement clearly authorized by Gilman: “If I thought it was really right and necessary, I could perhaps bring myself to do it, for your sake, dear; but I do not want to—not at all. You would not have a mere submission, would you? That is not the kind of high romantic love you spoke of, surely?” (129). Van’s (and Gilman’s) idealization of Ellador²³ make his response unnecessary—he has

²³ Long comments on Ellador’s authoritative voice in *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland* thus: “There is never any indication that Ellador’s views are not correct and true; in this

come to see her response to his sexual overtures as the appropriate response for an independent, “feminist” woman: since sex is not necessary for Ellador to have children, it is of course not “right,” and certainly unwanted in a life so already satisfied by employment and surrogate motherhood (incidentally, the two avenues of sublimation that Gilman suggests the human race employ as it divests itself of sexual “indulgence”).²⁴

Van further pits the sexual woman against the non-sexual one in his estimation of Terry’s wife Alima, whose marriage lacks a “logical mind” to mitigate the differences between the partners’ desires:

Of course I blame her somewhat. She wasn’t as fine a psychologist as Ellador, and what’s more, I think she had a far-descended atavistic trace of more marked femaleness, never apparent till Terry called it out. ...their position was the same as with us, of course, only with these distinctions: Alima, a shade more alluring, and several shades less able as a practical psychologist; Terry, a hundredfold more demanding—and proportionately less reasonable. (130)

Van’s criticisms of Alima are notable for their emphasis on her inherent qualities rather than her behavior, and for the correlation he draws between her “allure” and her failure to

way, Ellador’s objective and sterile gaze cleanses the politics of Gilman’s personal views” (184).

²⁴ One example of Gilman’s advocacy of hard work and community-focus as an antidote to an over sexed society appears in *Women and Economics*: “We are so far individualized, so far socialized, that men can work without the tearing spur of exaggerated sex-stimulus, work for some one besides mate and young; and women can love and serve without the slavery of economic dependence Sex-stimulus begins and ends in individuals. The social spirit is a larger thing, a better thing, and brings with it a larger, nobler life than we could ever know on a sex-basis solely” (143).

deal with Terry's demands. Herlanders are typically characterized by their advanced state of evolution; Somel tells Van, "We have, of course, made it our first business to train out, to breed out, when possible, the lowest types" (82). The genetic determinism of Alima's "atavistic trace of more marked femaleness" reflects Gilman's ongoing preoccupation with woman-centered evolutionary theory as well as with eugenics. Alima's particular defect, her "marked femaleness," evident in her "allure" (and also, perhaps, in her darker skin color—Gilman's repeated use of the term "shade" to describe Alima's shortcomings can be read as racially charged²⁵) arises out of Gilman's personal theories about the detrimental effects of women's sexual and gender expression, first outlined in *Woman and Economics*. Despite the evident correlations between her ideas and Victorian assumptions about virtuous women's lack of sexual desire, Gilman's views diverge widely from mainstream gender ideals in her desire not only to limit women's overt expressions of lust or physical attraction, but also to abolish the "excessive sex distinctions" (i.e. feminine dress, long hair, and effeminate behavior) that for her constituted "femaleness" like Alima's and thus led to "excessive sex attraction"²⁶ that held women back from achieving equality with men (*Women and Economics* 30-34). In her article "Birth Control" in *The Forerunner*, Gilman looks forward to a time when "the element of sex-desire [will be] greatly reduced in proportion to the higher development of parental activities worthy of our race" (Ceplair 253). By presenting Ellador as a perfect

²⁵ Thank you to Laura T. Smith for bringing the racial dimensions of Gilman's use of color terms to my attention.

²⁶ In *Women and Economics*, Gilman states, "What is the cause of this excessive sex-attraction in the human species? The immediately acting cause of sex-attraction is sex-distinction" (31).

Herland mother, but Alima mainly as the object of Terry's sexual desire, Gilman illustrates the inverse relationship she sees between sexuality and motherhood, and condemns not only Terry, but also Alima, for placing desirability above the development of "parenting" skills such as those that Ellador practices on Van.

In associating Ellador with intelligence, insight, and virginity, and Alima's failures with her femininity, her sexual "allure," and her failure to adequately manipulate Terry's psychology, Gilman continues a rhetorical tactic of identification that she used to appeal to her audience in *Women and Economics*. In that text, she distinguishes between "virtuous" and "vicious" women: "The virtuous woman stands in close ranks with her sisters, refusing to part with herself—her only economic goods—until she is assured of legal marriage, with its lifelong guarantee of support. ... But here enters the vicious woman, and offers the same goods—though of inferior quality, to be sure—for a far less price" (109). In this passage, she not-so-subtly urges her audience to "stand in close ranks" with virtuous women, identifying them with that category and with monogamy and disassociating them with non-normative sexual morality. However, in the sequel to *Herland*, Gilman alters her perspective slightly, in response to the political ideologies of the sexual morality proposed by Sanger, Goldman, and their cohorts. She still uses identification/disassociation as a rhetorical technique, but instead of simply pitting virgin brides against "vicious" sexually active women, she sets Ellador, the ultimate virgin bride, up against women who seek sexual pleasure for political gain as well as personal gratification.

I argue that in depicting a battle “between the sexes” over whether men’s (Van’s, Terry’s, and Jeff’s, but by extension all “ourland” males’) sexual satisfaction is more important than women’s continued (culturally sanctioned) abstinence, Gilman’s actual concern is a battle she perceives *among women*, between free love and birth control advocates (epitomized at this period by Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger) and her own scientifically based anti-sex feminist agenda. The idea of a marriage in which sex is deemed not “right and necessary” appeals to Gilman, and she maintains Van’s and Ellador’s abstinence until the end of *Herland’s* sequel, *With Her in Ourland*, when Ellador gives birth to Herland’s first baby boy, presumably conceived “bi-sexually.” Such an ideal is the inverse of Sanger’s and Goldman’s arguments about women’s sexuality in *The Woman Rebel*. That publication, in contrast to Sanger’s later writing, came out strongly against marriage as a social structure, valuing male-female relationships only for the satisfaction (sexual and emotional) that women received from them and emphasizing the often temporary nature of such relationships, particularly given the unequal social conditions under which they were conducted. An article entitled “Marriage” in the second issue of *The Woman Rebel* illustrates Sanger’s privileging of sexual desire over legal marriage:

There exists in all Nature an attraction which takes place between particles of bodies and unites to form a chemical compound that is not doubted.

This same attraction exists in men and women and will, unconsciously perhaps, cause them to seek a mate just as other organisms do. Priests and marriage laws have no power or control over this attraction nor can they

make desirable a union where this attraction does not exist. (“Marriage”
16)

While Gilman has Ellador and Van delay the consummation of their union for more than a year, in response to Ellador’s lack of “an attraction which takes place between particles of bodies,” Sanger, separated from her first husband William Sanger in 1914 when the above was written and exploring free love in her personal as well as political life, argues both that all men and women experience strong sexual desire and that such desire cannot be confined by monogamous marriage (Chesler 95-6).

Herland’s sequel, *With Her in Ourland*, solidifies Gilman’s criticism of women who valued eroticism as a feminist goal when Ellador refutes Van’s claims about the inherent value of sex:

‘It’s no use, dear, until all the children of the world are at *least* healthy; at *least* normal; until the average man and woman are free from taint of sex-disease and happy in their love—lastingly happy in their love—there is not much to boast of in this popular idea of sex and sex indulgence ... nothing will help much till the women are free and see their duty as mothers.’

‘Some of the ‘freest’ women are urging more sex freedom,’ I [Van] reminded her.

‘They want to see the women doing as the men have done, apparently.’²⁷

²⁷ The phrase “doing as men have done” in this passage may be deliberately vague for many reasons, but I believe there is evidence suggesting that Gilman refers to homosexuality as well as free love here. I find it telling that Gilman refers to lesbianism as a “male vice” in this passage from *His Religion and Hers*, in which she complains that

‘Yes I know. They are almost as bad as the [anti-suffragists]—but not quite. They are merely a consequence of wrong teaching and wrong habits. (187)

This passage establishes Gilman’s anti-sex stance as both a moral and a political one, which differentiates not between men’s desires and women’s desires, but between different types of female desires/goals. In distinguishing between Alima, the “atavistic” female entrapped by an out-dated mode of desirability, the “freest” women who urge a new paradigm of equal sexual expression for men and women, and Ellador, the gender-neutral, non-desiring body, Gilman encourages her readers to disassociate from both dominant and radical social understandings of sexuality and identify with the narrow, asexual sexual ideal represented in her feminist utopia.

Though Gilman’s strictures against changing options for women’s sexuality respond to a shift in sexual morality arising from the early birth control movement and Margaret Sanger’s 1914 writings, Sanger’s lectures and writing in her later publication, *The Birth Control Review* (first published in 1917) offer views on sexuality and self-control that correspond surprisingly closely to Gilman’s. In *With Her in Ourland*, Gilman has Ellador express her own views in support of marriage and monogamy as the most morally and biologically satisfying outlet for human sexuality²⁸; though Ellador and Van

“New Women” are “adopting male vices, and so unutterably traitorous to the essential glory of their own sex as willingly to forego motherhood in order to share the barren pleasures of the other” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 212).

²⁸ From *Women and Economics*: “Monogamy is proven right by social evolution: it is the best way to carry on the human race in social relation, but it is not yet as ‘natural’ as could be desired” (209).

do not have sex until the close of the *Ourland* narrative, she refers to “this heaven of married love” as one of the few advantages of America over *Herland* (141). I have discussed above Sanger’s early opposition to marriage; however, as the birth control movement acquired a mainstream following, she toned down her anti-marriage rhetoric considerably, and at least tacitly supported legislation that limited access to birth control clinics to married women (McCann 54-5). In *Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger ascribed the shift in her argumentative focus to a new concern about the problem of “sex-hunger” in the laboring class, using language that echoes Gilman’s earlier anti-sex rhetoric: “In spite of all my sympathy with the dream of liberated Labor, I was driven to ask whether this urging power of sex, this deep instinct, was not at least partially responsible, along with industrial injustice, for the widespread misery of the world” (7). Though this passage retains the concern with “industrial injustice” that pervaded the *Woman Rebel*, Sanger has about-faced on the issue of free love, focusing her energy on controlling poor women’s sexuality rather than reforming marriage and property laws.

As indicated by the above passage, Sanger’s opposition to marriage as an outrage against women’s freedom was replaced by a view of marriage as a mark of a civilized, “eugenic” society: “...marriage laws are based on the infantile assumption that procreation is absolutely dependent upon the marriage ceremony... Yet it is a fact so obvious that it is hardly worth stating that the most fertile classes who indulge in the most dysgenic type of procreating—the feeble-minded—are almost totally unaffected by marriage laws and marriage-ceremonies” (184). Sanger’s implication that while the “dysgenic” are “unaffected by marriage laws and marriage ceremonies,” the “eugenic”

breeders recognize them establishes a dichotomy similar to Gilman's "vicious" and "virtuous" woman, both in its supposedly scientific basis and in its conflation of genetic "progress" with conventional morality. Gilman's contribution to Sanger's *Birth Control Review* in 1922 underscores the common ground the two women found regarding sexual morality; in the article "Back of Birth Control," she claims, "Among the many evils which beset the world none is more injurious than that sum of vice and disease, shame, crime and common unhappiness, which springs from excessive sex-indulgence" (quoted in McCann 47). The publication of this passage conflating disease and immorality in Sanger's journal, and her movement's use of her previous rival Gilman as a voice for her cause, reflect her tactical shift from a radical "free love" stance to a more moderate position meant to appeal to a predominately middle-class established feminist movement.

Ellador's "Sick Child": Gilman's Eugenic Agenda in *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*

Just as there is slippage and overlap between discourse on sex and discourse on reproduction in Gilman's writing, there is also slippage and overlap between discourse on reproduction and discourse on eugenics. In *Herland*, Van's references to eugenic ideology are somewhat obscured by the wide focus of Gilman's critique; however, a close reading of the utopian novel suggests that Gilman's beliefs in eugenic breeding and the superiority of "Aryan" races are relevant to her portrayals of such topics as education, farming, sanitation, and marriage in *Herland*. Most tellingly, Van at one point declares that the entire Herland enterprise depends on the racial superiority of the Herlanders:

“...there is no doubt in my mind that these people were of Aryan stock,²⁹ and were once in contact with the best civilization of the old world. They were ‘white,’ but somewhat darker than our northern races because of their constant exposure to sun and air” (54). The association between “Aryanness” and “the best civilization” is blatant here, but also interesting is the fact that Gilman feels the need to defend the Herlanders’ whiteness while describing them as “somewhat darker.” Perhaps she is suggesting that the Herlanders were healthier than “Northern” women who spent their time isolated indoors, or perhaps she simply wanted to distinguish her utopian populace from the “ordinary” white women she assumes her audience would be familiar with.³⁰ Kristin Carter-Sanborn has pointed out that Gilman’s description of the Herlanders as “Aryan” also associates them with more closely with the British empire, whose aims to colonize and “order” the

²⁹ Gilman’s choice of the word Aryan, which can refer to any member of a nation group that speaks an Aryan language or a descendent of one of the Aryan languages, which include Sanskrit, Zend, Persian, Greek, Latin, Celtic, Teutonic, and Slavonic, and is often thought of as denoting Aryan-language speaking groups in India, is interesting. According to the OED, the term was used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a catch-all term for racial superiority; a quotation provided in the OED entry for the word “Aryan” comes from a 1911 translation H.S. Chamberlain’s racist text *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899): “Anthropologists, ethnographers and even historians, theologians, philologists and legal authorities find the idea ‘Aryan’ more and more indispensable... Though it were proved that there never was an Aryan race in the past, yet we desire that in the future there may be one.” The utopianism of the term “Aryan,” then, corresponds to the utopianism of *Herland*.

³⁰ Despite the difference in skin tone between Herlanders and “white” women as Gilman describes them, Jennifer Hudak makes a fairly obvious, but salient, point in her claim, “If we look at *Herland* ... we might deduce that the ‘best’ kinds of people resemble Gilman herself; upper-middle class white women whose rejection of gender stereotypes relies upon notions of racial purity” (475-6).

world are reflected in the Herlanders' totalizing views of progress (24-28).³¹ Considered as part of her interest in reproduction as a means of social progress, Gilman's imperial perspective is particularly disturbing, as it aligns her with the most problematic aspects of the birth control movement as it developed in the 1920s.

In contrast to the seeming casualness of racist language in *Herland*, Van belabors and expands upon descriptions of the Herlanders' eugenic practices and ideals, outlining Gilman's distinctive views on human evolution. Van describes the era in Herland history in which the women restricted their reproductive capacity (each Herland woman can have five children, but at the time the book takes place, they each have between zero and two, depending on their "worth" as mothers) as "a period of 'negative eugenics'" (69). After learning about the Herlanders' efforts to "breed out the lowest types," Van describes their incredible social development in terms that reveal Gilman's adherence to minoritarian views on human evolution that emphasized human control over genetic mutation and "racial progress": "they attributed it partly to the careful education, which followed each slight tendency to differ, and partly to the law of mutation" (77). Gilman's belief in the Lamarckian idea of the inheritance of acquired traits is well-documented, and her descriptions of the Herlanders' efforts to change their society through careful development of their children supports this progressivist view of evolution (Hausman

³¹ Adapting Carter-Sanborn's claim, I would argue that Gilman's use of a phrase already associated with the pro-German writings of H.S. Chamberlain may indicate that she identified the Herlanders with Germanic groups. Gilman strongly opposed Germany's aggression in WWI (Ceclair 194), but she also praised German maternity benefits (256) and refers to Germans as great ecologists and foresters (Ellador's profession) in *Herland* (13) and *With Her in Ourland* (92).

498, Hudak 471). However, the development available to humans through education is clearly limited by the inherited material available, as Van's designation of the Herlanders as "Aryan" implies. Evolution and education are held in tension in *Herland*, with Gilman's adherence to democratic socialist ideals undercut by her anxiety to distinguish who, exactly, can contribute to and benefit from her proposed socio-economic system and by the totalizing (and therefore implicitly exclusionary) tendencies of the Herland system.

With Her in Ourland is much more overtly a product of Gilman's adherence to eugenics ideology, as it gives Ellador, the perfectly evolved Herlander, a chance to come in contact with "inferior" people groups as she travels the world and the United States with Van. In the Introduction to *Herland*, Lane notes, "Gilman's views of immigrants, blacks, Jews, however, typical of her time and place, are sometimes unsettling and sometimes offensive, though characteristically clever" (xvii). Lane's dismissive tone seems (stereo)typical of feminist scholars' approaches to Gilman's racism and xenophobia, which critics may downplay because of the dependence of Gilman's reputation on her political relevance and authority. However, I would argue that the very fact that racist and xenophobic aspects of Gilman's writing are "typical of her time and place," because they reflect her investment in the goals of the eugenics movement, makes them not simply a troubling offshoot but an underlying structure of her political views, worthy of the kind of specific scrutiny Lane's introduction seems to try to elide.³²

³² In critiquing Lane's evasion of Gilman's racism and xenophobia, I am following in the footsteps of several other scholars. Perhaps most worth noting here is Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams' 1999 article "The Intellectualism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Evolutionary Perspectives on Race, Ethnicity, and Class"; Ganobcsik-Williams takes a different

The plot of *With Her in Ourland* is subordinated to Van's narration of Ellador's views on world politics, particularly the roles of women, but its basic outline is that after Terry is exiled from Herland, he, Van, and Ellador travel to England, just in time for the beginning of World War I. Ellador is shocked by the violence and poverty she witnesses, and she and Van decide to undertake a trip around the world, as a sociological investigation of "ourland." Though his wife is appalled by much of what she witnesses in Europe, India, China, and Japan, Van believes that America will revive Ellador's faith in humanity; however, her disappointment with the circumstances of American women and the inadequate state of U.S. democracy inspire her most memorable diatribes and eventually convince Van that his country is in need of radical political and social transformation. Immigration is the social problem in which Ellador seems most invested and which provides some of her most problematic moments as a social commentator. When Van declares proudly that the United States "opened our arms to all the world... 'the poor and oppressed of all nations!'" she offers the critique, "It never occurred to you that the poor and oppressed were not necessarily good stuff for a democracy" (118). Her argument that "there are millions of people in your country who do not belong to it at all" (120) suggests a political application of Gilman's belief in genetic determinism, delineating those who have the potential to become functional democratic citizens from those who do not.

perspective on Gilman's integration of class and national identity issues than I do here, but her emphasis on the connections between Gilman's racism and her belief in a "social evolution" is also one basis for my own argument.

Gilman's racism is logically incompatible with her stated arguments for women's rights: if she believes, like Ellador, that African and Asian immigrants have proven their incompatibility with democracy by their failure to advance their social status in the U.S., how can she argue (again like Ellador) that it is women's *circumstances* that have prevented them from taking on more powerful roles? Ellador does acknowledge that American women have a difficult task to achieve the social progress of Herland, but echoes Gilman's faith that socialist politics will enable them to catch up, and lead the world to greater freedom and prosperity, within a few generations:

'They have to make a long jump, from the patriarchal status to the democratic, from the narrowest personal ties to the widest social relation, from first hand labor, more private service of bodily needs, to the specialized, organized social service of the whole community. At present this is going on, in actual fact, without their realizing it, without their understanding and accepting it. It is the mind that needs changing.' (179)

Ellador's exhortations to women and dismissal of non-white immigrants reveal the myopia of Gilman's perspective in the *Herland* books; statements like the one above mark her as entrenched in a nationalist, imperialistic perspective on social questions outside the immediate scope of her brand of feminism. This perspective, combined with the reforming zeal of Ellador, Gilman's mouthpiece, has caused some critics to comment on the colonial politics of the *Herland* books. Carter-Sanborn summarizes her view by arguing that the Herlanders' resistance to "colonization" by Van, Jeff, and Terry obscures "an imperializing tendency within the world of Herland itself." This tendency is indicative of Gilman's practice of offering large-scale solutions, such as mandatory

education for babies, and the removal of cooking from the home to community kitchens, for the social problems of women and families.³³ Her highly organized social ideals assume a homogeneity (among women and among races and nations) and a unified perspective that suggest a “colonial” urge to exert control over an increasingly economically stratified and culturally heterogeneous society.

The progressivism and Euro-centrism of eugenics discourse closely align it with imperialism, an idea that rapidly gained political traction in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Carter-Sanborn aligns *Herland* with American imperialist ambitions: “The contours of [*Herland*’s] will-to-power correspond closely to those of American political discourse during the era of U.S. hemispheric domination, exemplified by interventions in Cuba, the Philippines, and Panama” (2). Her argument aligns with Gilman’s own rhetoric, as Van’s discussion of a trip to South America with Ellador features the claim, “If we do our duty by our brother countries, we may some day fill out legitimately that large high-sounding name of ours and really be The United States of America” (126). Moreover, the imperialist ethos behind the *Herland* narratives is exemplified by the eugenics idealism of the residents of Herland. Upon Ellador’s return, they imagine how their carefully-planned society can be exported to the world, “planning, as eager missionaries plan, what they could do to spread to all the world their proven gains” (193). It is the order, peace, and homogeneity of Herland—in other words, the products of the women’s careful breeding and education plans—that provide the basis

³³ Gilman lays her plans for socialized, “industrialized” homemaking and childrearing in *Women and Economics* (1898), and continued to describe and advocate for such systems throughout her career, including in *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*.

for the nation's authority to proselytize to the rest of the world. Carter-Sanborn describes the power Gilman ascribes to the Herlanders as "white maternal 'telic force'" (28), highlighting both its totalizing ambitions and its emphasis on racial qualities as markers of authority/ethos. This "telic force," which we can associate with McCann's "racial maternalism," is particularly evident by the end of the *Herland* narratives, when the only step that has been taken toward the Herlanders' colonializing venture is the birth of Van and Ellador's baby, a boy who presumably will fulfill Ellador's hopes that "...we, in Herland, can begin a new kind of men!" (189). Though education, political participation, and economic reform are all touted in the narratives as avenues through which the Herlanders and their new husbands can address the problems of humanity, it is only through the breeding of more Herlanders that Gilman's readers are offered a concrete symbol of Herland's potential to transform their culture. In sum, imperialism and eugenics go hand-in-hand in *Herland*, demonstrating the potential appeal of "racial betterment" as a scientific and humanistic justification for a nation looking toward its own territorial expansion.³⁴

Gilman's representation of her colonial ideals in the Herland books offers strategies for negative as well as positive eugenic models, placing women at the forefront of both potential movements. Ellador's ultimate proposal to heal the "sick child," America, is, in fact, a "Mother Union," which would organize women to oppose the valorization of the "preliminary pleasure" of sexual intercourse, see men as "the noblest

³⁴ Though not the focus of this chapter, Gilman's engagement with U.S. imperialism in *With Her in Ourland* is extensive and merits further study as an important expression of her feminist ideology.

kind of assistants, nature's latest and highest device for the improvement of parentage," and focus their energy on the improvement of human children (186). This improvement involves changes in children's education and a better understanding of their physical, psychological, and spiritual needs—Van suggests in *With Her in Ourland* that the West is in need of the "predetermined social advance" of *Herland*—but Ellador's admonitions to women/mothers are geared toward the biological advancement of "the race." When she describes to Van the "duty as mothers," the first point she makes refers to women's duty to properly select a mate: "'Look at the children,' she said; 'that's enough. Look at these girls who do not even know enough about motherhood to demand a healthy father. Why a—a—sheep would know better than to mate with such creatures as some of your women marry'" (185). The irony of the virgin wife Ellador's expression to her husband of her disgust with women's choice of men to marry and "mate with" is perhaps unintentional, but Gilman's overall point, that one of the main responsibilities of progress-oriented women is to guard the genetic heritage of their children, holds.

Margaret Sanger's investment in pro-birth control arguments based on genetic heritage and on the kind of state-sponsored eugenics Ellador advocates in *With Her in Ourland* is well-known to reproductive rights advocates and opponents. However, a study of the two women's 1914 and 1915 writings indicates that Gilman preceded Sanger in her attention to the biological and social "improvements" available through contraception and reproductive control. During the time *The Woman Rebel* was published, Sanger largely avoided eugenics rhetoric, addressing her arguments instead to working class women who wanted to improve their individual experiences of womanhood, wifedom, and

motherhood. The lack of social control that *The Woman Rebel* advocated can be demonstrated by its affiliations with anarchist radicals like Emma Goldman, and in articles like “Another Woman,” which incites women readers against the American prison system and particularly its “controlling” women employees: “Women have been too ready to admire other women who, with inflated ideas of self-importance, are willing to degrade themselves and their sex by assuming the barbaric posts that decent men are giving up—in short by becoming detectives, policewomen and commissioners of correction. Let us proclaim such women as traitors and enemies of the working class!” (Baskin “Another Woman” 43). Sanger’s rhetoric, like Gilman’s, encourages women to take on powerful roles; however, while Gilman identifies Ellador with an educated elite with the imagination and power to bring about social change from within democratic institutions, Sanger depicts women’s potential power as an upswelling of class-based antagonism, identifying herself with the working class and against bourgeois power structures. Conversely, one of Gilman’s goals in the *Herland* series is to erase this kind of “tension within the ranks,” especially ranks that include a large number of poor and immigrant women, by depicting a homogenous ideal society under the guidance of uniformly white, middle-class women. While Gilman sees gender as the essential basis of identification, eliding and sometimes brutally erasing racial and economic differences among women, Sanger follows a Marxist logic that emphasizes class warfare, and throws in the face of established feminism the presence of working class women, objects rather than subjects of official “reform,” but still thinking agents capable of “rebellious” not only against male patriarchs, but also against female collaborators.

“The Poor and Oppressed”: Convergence in Sanger and Gilman’s Pro-Eugenics Stance

Perhaps the most sinister element of Sanger’s shifting stance on birth control politics in the late 1910s led her closer to the eugenic ideals espoused in *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*. Although the *Woman Rebel* did not take up eugenics as a cause or overtly refer to the issue, in much of her later writing, and particularly in *Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger focused on the ways in which birth control provided a means to control and direct population growth, and particularly on its potential as a replacement for what she called “dysgenic” philanthropy that merely ameliorated working class conditions rather than eliminating the root causes of poverty (for Sanger, these were overcrowding and “feeble-mindedness”).³⁵ In a striking echo of Ellador’s critique of American democracy’s inclusion of “the poor and oppressed,” Sanger announces in *Pivot* that “Equality of political power has...been bestowed upon the lowest elements of our population. We must not be surprised, therefore, at the spectacle of political scandal and graft, of the notorious and universally ridiculed low level of intelligence and flagrant stupidity exhibited by our legislative bodies” (178). Also, like Ellador, she suggests that “better breeding” and an awareness of evolutionary science are the solutions to the social problems she identifies (115). The appeal that eugenics theory had for proponents of birth

³⁵ Research on Sanger’s relationship with eugenics is prolific, and much of it can be found in the works cited pages accompanying the chapters of this dissertation. Some starting points are Carole R. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994; Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Pantheon, 1997; and John M. Murphy, “‘To Create a Race of Thoroughbreds’: Margaret Sanger and the *Birth Control Review*.” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 13 (1990): 23-45.

control is an essential issue for analysts of reproductive rights discourse to address, and I believe that looking at *Herland's* portrayal of utopian eugenicists may help illuminate Sanger's movement's turn toward eugenics as a major point of argument in the late 1910s.

A major point of connection between Gilman's and Sanger's views is the ability of eugenics discourse to rhetorically construct a center of power based in the maternal body, an idea that is significant to the feminist and pro-woman ideals influencing both women's work. Both Gilman's and Sanger's reification of marriage is based on their reification of motherhood, another topic on which Sanger's later writings reflect the values laid out in *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*. Long notes that Gilman's beliefs dovetailed with Sanger's in their shared view that "[b]irth control would reinstate the rightful 'power of the mother' to 'improve the stock'" (193). Capo argues that as the birth control movement struggled to become "mainstream," this essentialist view of women's special abilities as mothers became a significant part of its discourse: "Birth control was not so that women could enjoy promiscuous sex, but to ensure that they were better able to fulfill traditional roles within the home" (83). In birth control discourse after 1916, just as in Gilman's writings in *Herland*, the correct performance of traditional roles by women is ensured by two factors: first, the maintenance of a reasonable amount of work for the mother, including a small family size; and second, the assurance that only "fit" mothers have children, and only "fit" children are born. In *Herland*, the mother's body is constructed as immensely powerful, as women not only give birth to and exclusively raise children, but also police each other to maintain the highest breeding and child-

rearing standards for the entire community (*Herland* 82-3).

In addition, Gilman's representation of expansionist "better breeders" offers a way to look at Sanger's later rhetoric as appealing to an ideal of nationhood as well as of evolutionary science or personal improvement. The connection between Ellador's investment in the idea of maternal power and her investment in racial and national hierarchies becomes clear in her commentary on Japanese women, whom she seems to blame for overpopulation as well as their subjection to male authority:

Meanwhile Ellador was accumulating heart-ache over the Japanese women, whose dual duty of child-bearing and man-service dominated all their lives.

'It is so hard for me to understand, Van; they aren't people at all, somehow—just wives—or worse.'

'They are mothers, surely,' I urged.

'No—not in our sense, not consciously. Look at this ghastly crowding!'

(98)

Ellador's combined reference to "conscious motherhood" and "ghastly crowding" affiliates her with the Malthusian arguments central to birth control discourse in all its iterations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; however, the strong moral value of "conscious motherhood" in her critique, particularly evident in her hint that Japanese women are potentially "worse" than wives (i.e., prostitutes) predicts birth control rhetoric of the 1920s, which espoused "free motherhood" as a political and scientific, as well as personal, ideal. Sanger herself opened birth control clinics in Tokyo and Kyoto in 1922

(Katz 371). In *Woman and the New Race*, she laid bare her belief in women's collective responsibility for the kind of over-crowding Ellador laments in Japan: "While unknowingly laying the foundations of tyrannies and providing the human tinder for racial conflagrations, woman was also unknowingly creating slums, filling asylums with insane, and institutions with other defectives. ... Had she planned deliberately to achieve this tragic total of human waste and misery, she could hardly have done it more effectively" (5). Sanger's repetition of the adverb "unknowingly" to describe the actions she ascribes to "woman" in this passage strikingly echoes Ellador's claim that the Japanese women she encounters are not "conscious" mothers; in addition, like Ellador, she ascribes to women the (reproductively-based) power to right the numerous wrongs afflicting societies that lack conscious motherhood.

Like Gilman's Ellador, Sanger warns of racial conflict, overpopulation, "defectives," and "human waste," all concerns of eugenics theory, and, like Ellador, she blames women for not doing their part to advance "voluntary motherhood" in the face of the declining quality of humanity. Though the power Sanger vests in women in this speech is overtly negative, its implications for women's powerful roles in the evolutionary process are impressive. Sanger, like Gilman, goes on to imagine a world in which women have used eugenic principles and contraceptive technology not only to improve life for individual families, but also to change the course of human evolution; using birth control, "[woman] will not stop at patching up the world; she will remake it" (Sanger "Woman's"). Such a message, with its particular charge to birth control advocates to lead the way in remaking the world, uses the principles of better breeding to

make a strong appeal to middle-class women who became primary supporters of Sanger's cause in the 1920s.

It was these middle-class white women, the major donors to and members of Sanger's American Birth Control League, who "remade" the world through the *Birth Control Review* and American birth control clinics, coming to mirror not only the physical appearance, but also the values, ambitions, and institutional investments of Ellador's Herland sisters. Though Sanger's movement for wider access to contraception began as a class-transgressing, radical challenge to dominant models for women's affiliations with one another and roles within society, it was through adopting tropes of what she once labeled Gilman's "harmless" feminism that she gained access to a platform large enough to promulgate her message. That message and the compromises it underwent during Sanger's rhetorical shift from working class radical to middle-class reformer became the legacy of reproductive rights discourse in the twentieth century; the next chapter of this dissertation will examine its influence on a member of the next generation of American women writers.

Chapter Three

“That Means Children to Me”: The Birth Control Movement in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*

An often-cited passage from Nella Larsen’s first novel, *Quicksand* (1928) is an exchange between protagonist Helga Crane and her ex-fiancé James Vayle on the topic of marriage and children. James’ exhortation that Helga not only marry, but breed, indicates that the central conflict of *Quicksand*’s narrative—Helga’s choice of an appropriate suitor—is tied to birth control discourse’s themes of eugenics and women’s reproductive choice:

Don’t you see that if we—I mean people like us—don’t have children, the others will still have? That’s one of the things that’s the matter with us. The race is sterile at the top. Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children, and each generation has to wrestle again with the obstacles of the preceding ones: lack of money, education, and background. I feel very strongly about this. We’re the ones who must have the children if the race is to get anywhere.’ (132)

Helga’s response to James’s diatribe, however, is more revealing of the Larsen’s complex representation of reproduction in *Quicksand* than the often-quoted diatribe itself. James’s speech is preceded by Helga’s declaration that she may not marry, because “Marriage—that means children to me. And why add more suffering to the world?” (132). Her ambivalence is reinforced by her reply to James’s insistence that “we” have children, “if the race is to get anywhere”: “Well, I for one don’t intend to contribute to the cause”

(132). Helga's attitude illustrates the implied sexism of James's demand—though he and Helga are equally well-educated and intelligent, it is Helga whose body and time would suffer for “the cause” if she decided to “uplift the race” through reproduction. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Helga's reluctance to bear children is complicated by her racial and class identities, as well as her gender, making her body a battleground in a series of discourses—including those surrounding race, feminism, eugenics, and social mobility—with direct ties to the rhetoric of birth control advocates and publications in the 1920s.

If, as Thadious M. Davis suggests in her 1994 biography of Larsen, her aim in *Quicksand* was to “create art that would courageously function to control the self and nature” (243), depicting reproductive control may have posed the greatest challenge to achieving that vision. Larsen's explicit recognition of her heroine's automatic association between marriage and motherhood in the above passage is interesting in part because Larsen herself, like many women authors and activists in Harlem in the 1920s,³⁶ was married and childless, and therefore presumably exercised the “control over self and nature” that she denies Helga. Anne Stavney discusses at length the rebellion of middle-

³⁶ In 1995's *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, Ann Douglas provides a list of “reluctant breeders” among black and white female artists in New York during Larsen's career: “Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy Parker, Sara Teasdale, Katherine Anne Porter, and Anita Loos were heterosexual women who married at some point in their lives, but none of them had children” (98). Other examples of childless female literati during the period include Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Grimke, and Nancy Cunard.

class Black³⁷ women who chose to remain childless: “Resisting their assigned motherly roles within the New Negro movement and in their personal lives as well, 1920s black women writers attempted to create a geographic and discursive space for sexual yet childless black women in masculinized Harlem” (534). Stavney’s perspective suggests interesting connections between aspects of New Negro activism and aspects of birth control activism, and also gestures toward Nella Larsen’s entrance into both of these conversations in *Quicksand*. In this chapter, I will explore Larsen’s portrayal of the discourse surrounding birth control debates in *Quicksand*, following Daylanne K. English’s work on the ideological and material connections between W.E.B. DuBois’s racial uplift movement and the white-dominated and often racist American eugenics movement of which many birth control advocates were a part. Specifically, I argue that Larsen offers a sophisticated analysis of the distinctions between birth control as a technological tool, available to women in differing degrees based on their social and financial resources, and birth control as a eugenics-influenced movement with potentially totalitarian implications for racial minorities.

Most significant for my work here is the fact that Helga does not indeed remain childless—her marriage to the Rev. Pleasant Green in the last section of the text means immediate, and physically devastating, motherhood. Larsen’s refusal to find a middle

³⁷ In this article, I have chosen to use the designation “Black” to refer to the ethnicity of Nella Larsen and of other writers and artists who participated in the Harlem Renaissance. I chose this adjective following the example of Stavney, Davis and other critics, and in order to acknowledge the diverse nationalities of Harlem writers and Larsen’s own position as the daughter of immigrants from the U.S. Virgin Islands and from the Netherlands.

ground for Helga—despite her own, by no means unique, identity as a successful socialite in a childless marriage with Elmer Imes—suggests the possibility of her deliberate omission of another alternative (contraception) that would have given her heroine more agency in her fraught experiences with sexual activity. The devastation wrought upon Helga following her marriage is so at odds with Larsen’s previous representation of her cosmopolitan, educated “New Negro” heroine that it represents an interpretational challenge that has not been adequately addressed by numerous critical writings focusing solely on the gender, race, or class issues so prominent in the text. However, a reading of the ending of *Quicksand* through the lens of birth control rhetoric, with all its promise for women’s sexual freedom and its elisions of Black women’s and poor women’s experiences, sheds light on the particular struggle Helga faces and the complex political investments and divestments Larsen is making in this, her first novel.

In exhorting Helga to have children, James Vayle references W.E.B. DuBois’ model for “racial uplift,” defined by the NAACP and DuBois’ magazine, *Crisis*, during the 1920s. DuBois argued that a “Talented Tenth” of Black Americans had a responsibility to use their education and superior abilities to overcome the “race problem” by guiding the remainder of Black Americans to end their poverty and oppression (Jacqueline Moore 62). Though DuBois’ strategy had as its goal full civil rights for all members of the race, the eugenic implications of a plan to grow the middle- and upper classes are evident. In his anxiety to maintain the proportion of “people like us” to “the others,” James reveals the slippage between “racial uplift,” broadly conceived during this time as the educational and social development of African-Americans, and positive

eugenics, the deliberate enlargement of “good stock” through increased breeding of the most educated or talented. Though Helga seems aware of this slippage and rejects James’ ideas, *Quicksand* was praised as itself an example of racial uplift. Following its publication, Larsen received approbation from some of her contemporaries in Harlem for depicting “the right kind” of Black characters: middle-class, educated, and concerned with bettering the social and cultural positions of their communities relative to white America (Hutchinson 277). In a infamous review in which he praised *Quicksand* by contrasting it with Claude McKay’s cabaret narrative *Home to Harlem*, DuBois described Larsen’s heroine Helga Crane as “the new, honest, young fighting Negro woman,” subsuming the novel into his own goals for the development of a progressive, cultured race of middle-class Black Americans (202). Daylanne K. English has pointed out that DuBois’s joint review of *Quicksand* and *Home to Harlem* appeared in the same issue of *Crisis* as his pictorial spread of his daughter Yolande’s marriage to Countee Cullen, “the foundational moment of a eugenic dynasty for ‘black folk’” (306), tying together DuBois’ insistence on positive representations of black society and his attempts to create an ideal society within his own family. However, DuBois, like many of Larsen’s contemporaries,³⁸ glossed over the critique of “racial uplift” politics that suffuses *Quicksand*.

³⁸ Some later critics have also identified Larsen closely with racial uplift politics. For example, Davis argues, “In situating herself as one of the exceptions, or ‘talented few,’ Larsen identified herself as a member of the new African-American elite, composed largely of artists and intellectuals, and likend her personal aspirations to those of the larger African-American population, whose aspirations she articulated as ‘recognition and liberation’” (244). Though Davis’s and Hutchinson’s accounts of Larsen’s life both

First of all, while Helga expresses disgust with James's positive eugenics agenda, her refusal to have children here and her attitude throughout most of the novel tie her to negative eugenics, or the practice of limiting births among those considered "unfit" to pass along their genes. Helga's concerns about her own "unfitness" in the first sections of the novel are based on her issues with her mixed-race identity, and are undermined by her eventual experiences with motherhood, which prove that it is racism and poverty, not a mother's race, that produce unhealthy children. However, Larsen's representation of motherhood in *Quicksand* allies Helga with the idea (also related to eugenic thinking) that women's and children's health are best supported by small, well-spaced families with the resources to support their children, a stance which was uniformly supported by birth control advocates' publications.

Despite the similarity between Helga's views and those of Sanger and her colleagues, however, an examination of birth control politics in *Quicksand* requires attention to the complex affiliations between Black communities and birth control advocates, as well as between racial uplift and eugenics movements. The close association between the birth control movement and predominately white, often racist eugenics movements in America must be emphasized in any discussion of contraceptive politics in black communities in the United States. In her 1997 book *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, Dorothy Roberts describes the

suggest that she held often elitist views on art and politics, this straightforward identification between Larsen and DuBois's "talented tenth" ignores her discomfort with the class difference between herself and Harlem's elite, evident in her critique of racial uplift in *Quicksand*.

continuum of racial oppression that links birth control with slavery in the United States: “While slave masters forced Black women to bear children for profit, more recent policies have sought to reduce Black women’s fertility. Both share a common theme—that Black women’s childbearing should be regulated to achieve social objectives” (56). Roberts’s observation illustrates the underlying problematics of a series of technologies and practices ostensibly able to give all women greater control over their bodies and lives, but controlled tightly by a middle class of largely white doctors and activists. These figures’ racist and classist assumptions led to the abuse and sterilization of women of color in the United States and Puerto Rico throughout the twentieth century, and this history must be paramount in any discussion of birth control, but particularly in a discussion of birth control which explores its use by and influence on women of color and their communities.

However, the prejudice against women of color by birth control advocates did not preclude those women’s participation in the movement toward freer access to contraception. Larsen trained as nurse in the Bronx only a few years after Margaret Sanger began attending to destitute young mothers in Manhattan and developing her theories on birth control; she would have seen many of the same social and medical crises that led to Sanger’s birth control activism (Hutchinson 116-7). Childless throughout her fourteen-year marriage to Elmer Imes, Larsen is likely to have supported and used contraception. Vayle’s statement that “Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children” is one indication that birth control technologies were available and widely used in communities like Larsen’s. Jessie Rodrique points out in the 1990 essay, “The Black

Community and the Birth Control Movement,” that the danger in the assumption that birth control was entirely ““a movement that was thrust upon an unwilling black population” is that it overlooks not only the nuances separating different communities’ interactions with the movement, but also the independent advocacy of Black communities for their needs, including fertility control (333). Even in the face of racist assertions by the national birth control associations, statistical evidence demonstrates that the use of birth control techniques was widespread among Black communities in the 1920s: while fertility for both whites and Blacks fell between 1880 and 1940, the drop among Black families was sharper, from an average of 7.5 children per family to an average of three (Tone 85). That this phenomenon was at least in part due to an increase in contraceptive use is indicated by the corresponding increase of advertisements for contraceptive and feminine hygiene products in Black newspapers, particularly in the 1920s (Tone 86, Rodrigue 334). How, then, did individuals in Black communities deal with the conflicts between the promise of birth control as a physical tool and the oppressive spirit of birth control ideology and its advocates? Here, I will show that in *Quicksand*, Larsen negotiates those two different levels of birth control discourse, offering a powerful argument in favor of condoms, sponges, and diaphragms while challenging the elitist and racist underpinnings of the birth control movement.

Quicksand’s incorporation of tropes from various storytelling modes, from political advocacy narratives to romance novels, makes its narrative complex, highly stylized, and sometimes disjointed. On the most basic level, it reads as a romance narrative in a picaresque style, featuring a heroine characterized both by her need for

belonging and her compulsion for physical and emotional change. The novel begins with Helga Crane's brief, unhappy experiences at Naxos, a school modeled on the Tuskegee Institute, where Larsen worked briefly in 1915-1916. Though engaged to James Vayle, a member of a "first family" who could raise her uncertain social status (Helga is the daughter of a working class Scandinavian immigrant mother and a West Indian immigrant father who left her mother before she was born), Helga is unhappy at Naxos, and decides to leave her post mid-semester to go back to Chicago, despite the pleading of her attractive, idealistic boss, Robert Anderson. After suffering rejection from white family members whom she asks for assistance, Helga is desperate for a job and becomes a secretary to a traveling "race woman," Mrs. Hayes-Rore, who gives her an introduction into middle-class society in Harlem. Content for the first time in her life, Helga thrives in Harlem at first, but becomes impatient with her friends' and colleagues' "obsession" with the "race problem." When she inherits money from her Uncle Peter, whose wife rejected her in Chicago, she leaves America for Denmark, staying in Copenhagen with her mother's sister and her husband, the Dahls. The Dahls, fashionable social climbers, consider Helga an "exotic" addition to Copenhagen society and use her to cement their own status, in part by hiring one of the most famous portrait painters in Denmark, Axel Olsen, to paint her. As I will discuss presently, Olsen falls in love with Helga, but she rejects his marriage proposal, claiming she is opposed to miscegenation because of her own unhappy childhood.

Following her sojourn in Copenhagen, Helga returns to New York to attend the wedding of Robert Anderson to her Harlem patroness Anne Grey, but rekindles her own

attraction to Anderson, who kisses her at a party but then refuses to pursue an extramarital affair with her. Heartbroken, Helga wanders in the rain around Harlem until she is forced to take shelter in a storefront church, where she undergoes a dramatic religious conversion, directly followed by her first sexual experience, with a member of the congregation named Reverend Pleasant Green. In shock at her actions and wanting to leave New York, Helga convinces Green to marry her and moves to Alabama with him, where she encounters the exigencies of poverty and ill-health after bearing several children in quick succession. The difficult birth of her fourth child, who dies, leaves Helga in a state of exhausted rebellion against her life in Alabama, but though she recovers from this near-death in childbirth, the novel ends on a pessimistic note, as Helga becomes pregnant again. Larsen does not give her readers the outcome of this pregnancy, but it is clear that Helga's romantic choices have led either to her death or to a state of permanent invalidism.

Margaret Sanger in Harlem and in *Quicksand*

Nella Larsen's participation in the discourse surrounding sex and reproduction in Black communities in general and Harlem in particular is well-established. In March of 1923, Margaret Sanger was invited to speak at the 135th Street Library Branch, where Nella Larsen worked as an aide, and where speakers from Franz Boas to Clement Wood to W.E.B. DuBois discussed race issues in weekly lecture series. Sanger's speech was on "The Women of Japan," but she specifically exhorted American women to use their newfound political influence to legalize and facilitate the distribution of information about contraception (Hutchinson 149). Although some Black leaders, including Marcus

Garvey, were already speaking out about the racial dangers of birth control (Rodrique 336), there was strong support for Sanger's project among many in Harlem. In 1925, the National Urban League, an organization founded in New York City in 1910 to support civil rights for Black Americans, made its first petition for a birth control clinic in Harlem, an idea that would be realized in 1930 (Rodrique 338). The Harlem Branch was run under the auspices of Sanger's Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau, but it maintained an independent Advisory Council of African-American community leaders, physicians, and nurses, who made worked to make birth control attractive to the Harlem community while keeping racial justice and "uplift" issues in the forefront of the Branch's advocacy (McCann 142-3, 148-9). One of the members of the Advisory Council was William Lloyd Imes, Nella Larsen's brother-in-law (139).

The Harlem community's interest in the birth control movement dovetailed with the birth control movement's often patronizing interest in Harlem and the "uplift" of Black communities. In September of 1919, Sanger's *Birth Control Review* put out a special issue entitled "The New Emancipation: The Negroes' Need for Birth Control, As Seen by Themselves." Poet Angelina Weld Grimké and *Messenger* editor Chandler Owen both contributed pieces to this issue of the *BCR*, and the editors published "A Word from Dr. DuBois," stating "I believe very firmly in birth control," though DuBois declined to write an article for the issue (12). Though the focus of an entire *BCR* issue on "the Negroes' Need for Birth Control" hints at the "racial maternalist" perspective of white birth control activists, the participation of Harlem intellectuals demonstrates the widespread appeal of birth control as a means of improving community health care and as

an ideology associated with racial uplift. For example, McCann quotes an editorial in the Black newspaper *The Amsterdam News* that praised the Harlem branch birth control clinic as a tool for African-Americans to achieve “physical fitness, mental capacity, and financial stability”; its concluding argument stated, “The preponderance of backwardness in the race is too great a handicap and must be taken care of if it expects to enjoy the full measure of respect and opportunity from others” (155). The mutual interest of middle-class African-American intellectuals and birth control advocates evidences the important but sometimes overlooked role that genetic and eugenic assumptions played in the racial politics of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 30’s.

In addition to evidence provided by the existence and popularity of birth control clinics in Harlem, it seems clear from demographic analyses of women in Harlem that some level of contraceptive discourse was the norm. English notes that women who participated in the Harlem Renaissance political movements, like many of the characters they created, were rarely eager to take on the reproductive roles assigned to them by male racial uplift idealists (“W.E.B.” 293-4, *Unnatural* 134-5); although African-American women writers were not immune from classist assumptions about genetic “fitness” that carry overtones of eugenic sympathies, English evaluates them as generally sympathetic to the idea of “socially produced,” rather than “natural inferiority” (136-7). If Helga Crane’s views are any indication, some female members of Harlem communities held “negative eugenics” perspectives akin to those promoted by birth control advocates, which posited that those who were not prepared or “fit” to have children should use

contraception. As English and others have demonstrated, Helga, like Larsen herself and other women writers, struggles to reconcile her personal experiences with the ideological demands of uplift politics. However, Helga's particular position is complicated by her lack of knowledge about birth control technology, which, along with the oppressive sexual mores that guide her behavior, leave her with a series of romantic choices that meet neither her physical and emotional needs nor her social and intellectual ideals.

Babies, the Blues, and Busting Stereotypes: An Overview of Criticism on *Quicksand* and Sexuality

In *Quicksand*, Larsen reveals her awareness of the dangers, limitations, and possibilities of childbearing in 1920s America through Helga Crane's anxiety surrounding issues of pregnancy and childbirth, as well as in the over-emphasized dichotomy Helga sets up between chastity and sexual licentiousness. The few scholars who analyze intersections between American literature and birth control discourse tend to cite the text, and particularly its ending, as Larsen's critique of over-reproduction. In addition to English's analysis of the anti-eugenic arguments in the text, Beth Widmaier Capo (2007, *Textual Contraceptions*) has analyzed Helga in contrast to the "ideal mother" of birth control propaganda, who is able to control her fertility within marriage (75-6, 101-2). Stacy Alaimo briefly addresses the role of birth control politics in the ending of *Quicksand* in her 2000 book *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*, casting Helga's succumbing to multiple pregnancies as a commentary on the limits of positive identifications between women and "natural" fertility cycles (124-9). Though these authors offer interesting and relevant points of entry into an

understanding of birth control politics in *Quicksand*, my analysis of Larsen's depictions of fertility and motherhood intersects with a number of other scholarly analyses of the text's representations of gender, sexuality, race and class. Therefore, I will outline here some of the scholarship on Helga's sexuality and its connections to her class and racial identities, as a preliminary to my discussion of the ways in which those parts of her character are intimately tied to Larsen's representations of reproductive technology and ideology.

Helga's class status as a sexually repressed aspirant to prim middle-class Harlem society is mentioned frequently in Larsen scholarship, particularly as Helga's repression often comes across as policing of her racial as well as sexual self-expression. For example, critics often cite Helga's repulsion toward the overt sexuality of dancers at a Harlem jazz club: "And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. ... She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature" (90). Comparing Larsen's prose to the overtly sexual blues lyrics of artists like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, Anne duCille argues in a 1993 article that Helga struggles authentically, if differently from those figures, with stereotypes that often degraded black women's sexuality (430). However, Helga is also criticized for her failures to examine or resist the racist discourse that circumscribes her sexuality. The "jungle creature" passage, in particular, lends itself to interpretations like that of Amelia DeFalco, who notes that by suppressing her fascination with the Harlem dance scene, Helga "condemn[s] herself to a life of evasion, substitution, and denial ... to maintain the

façade of passionlessness that she believes will protect her from suffering an oppressively rigid racialized identity imposed from without” (29). Whether Helga defies stereotypes by developing her own more nuanced perception of sexuality or capitulates to them by refusing to explore her erotic and racialized self, Larsen deeply roots her perspective in the politics surrounding Black women’s sexual expression in the twentieth century.

Specifically, in her concern over being seen as “a jungle creature,” Helga expresses anxiety about the stereotype of the Black woman as a “Jezebel,” a sexually licentious temptress, a title which is directly applied to Helga by the women at the church service at which she is “saved” late in the novel. In a 1997 article, Kimberly Monda claims, “Racist white society’s assumptions about black women’s sexual availability help explain Helga Crane’s sexual repression, and also remind us of Larsen’s courage in attempting to portray her heroine’s sexual desire” (25). However, Deborah McDowell has noted that Helga’s repression of her sexuality is not only a response to racist whites’ perpetuation of the “Jezebel” stereotype, but also to anti-sex rhetoric directed against “new” Black women of the Jazz Age in publications like *The Messenger*, which urged women to “return to the ‘timidity and modesty peculiar to pure womanhood of yesterday’” (81). Such rhetoric responded to racist stereotypes that plagued African-American women who led public lives, as well as those who wrote about life in Harlem and other Black communities; however, writings cautioning women to repress their sexuality in order to better represent their race were emblematic of a rift in Black communities, illustrated most obviously in *Quicksand* by the conflict between beautiful, free-spirited Audrey Denney, and the repressed, politically active Anne Grey, a conflict

that plays out in Helga's own shifting allegiances between these women and her disastrous attempt to resolve the tension between sexual desire and racial uplift.

Helga's instinctive response to such rhetoric leads to the novel's most self-destructive act. Her insistence on marriage following her capitulation to her sexual desire for the Reverend Pleasant Green exposes the dangers of the culturally sanctioned repression that has characterized her for most of the novel. The intense sexual desire, the dearth of intellectual and social fulfillment, and the failures of physical health that characterize Helga's marriage reveal both the impossibility of reformers' attempts to promote a perpetual state of "timidity and modesty" in young women and the hypocrisy of the ideal of marriage as a safe social and sexual haven for young Black women. McDowell argues that it is within Helga's marriage that she pays the highest price for expressing herself sexually: "*Quicksand* likens marriage to death for women. Larsen attacks the myth that marriage elevates women in the social scale, suggesting that, for them, the way up is, ironically and paradoxically, the way down" (86). Implicit in McDowell's statement is the correlation that Helga herself makes: "marriage means children," and frequent childbirth means poverty, poor health, and a risk of death. Stavney points out that the new construction of the model Black woman built up to counter the "Jezebel" stereotype emphasized motherhood as the most significant measure of a woman's worth: "The defining characteristic of ideal womanhood became motherhood, and on this point many white and black men agreed" (538). Stavney describes a political atmosphere in which male writers and activists in Harlem were intent on recuperating Black women's virtue by touting their womanly virtues, domestic

achievements, and successes as mothers raising children in difficult circumstances; to refuse wifedom and motherhood in this atmosphere is thus to be selfish and unwomanly as an individual and as a representative of one's race (537-8).

However, as Stavney points out, within these idealized representations, "The broader dimensions of black women's material reality...go virtually unaddressed" (544-5), and it was often left to women writers to counter such idealistic images with more complex interpretations of black women's lives. Larsen complicates the idealization of black *and* white motherhood in her depictions of the two mothers in her text, Helga Crane and Helga's mother Karen Nilsson. In her 2003 book chapter on Larsen, "Elite Rejection of Maternity," Lydia Calloway argues that *Quicksand's* narrative undermines the idea that childlessness is selfish and suggests, instead, that it may be mothers who are selfish, because they bring children into the world to suffer. Helga's mother certainly acts selfishly, in marrying a racist man who rejects her daughter, yet also refusing to allow Helga to leave her for a more congenial atmosphere in Copenhagen or perhaps at an African-American boarding school like the one her Uncle Peter sends her to after her mother's death (Calloway 90).³⁹ On the other hand, Helga's early refusals to have her own children are aligned, for Calloway, with an ideal image of *selflessness*: "Helga's

³⁹ Davis has used psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Nancy Chodorow and Maureen Murdock, to suggest that Helga's anger at her mother (and Larsen's correlative anger at her own mother, Marie Larson/Larsen) is the impetus that drives her throughout the novel: "assumed but unarticulated, it is the unseen and unvoiced that makes *Quicksand* a powerful first novel" (257). My reading of Helga's lasting reaction to Karen Nilsson and her childhood is more materially focused, but resonates with Davis's, in that it emphasizes both the parallels between Helga's and Karen's situations and the "unseen and unvoiced" registers of Larsen's representations of motherhood.

sentiment echoes that of the many of her enslaved foremothers who used whatever folk art or method at their disposal, including celibacy, herbal contraceptive potions, induced miscarriage, and infanticide, to prevent having babies who would be deprived of their humanity and cruelly exploited as the property of their white masters” (89). Following the same logic as Calloway, Capo criticizes Helga’s choice to revise her anti-motherhood stance at the end of the novel, arguing that “Helga married to fulfill her sexual desires, a ‘selfish’ motivation” (102). What neither Calloway’s celebration nor Capo’s condemnation fully explore, however, are the reasons why Helga so intimately connects marriage and motherhood, particularly in a text written by married non-mother. Helga’s journey from sexually-repressed single womanhood to over-burdened motherhood muddies the arguments of advocates for both uplift and birth control by critiquing both movements’ assumptions while acknowledging the necessity of their interventions.

“That Means Children to Me”: Marriage and Mothering in *Quicksand*

The end of the novel leaves no room for ambiguity about Helga’s fate as a mother and the wife of the Reverent Pleasant Green: “She had ruined her life. Made it impossible ever again to do the things that she liked. She had, to put it brutally as anyone could, been a fool. The damnedest kind of fool. And she had paid for it. Enough. More than enough” (159). In choosing to marry a man who inexplicably physically attracts her, despite his dirty fingernails and “odor of sweat and stale garments” (149), over continuing to search for a spiritually and intellectually compatible mate, Helga has failed at the central task of a traditional literary heroine: to bring the story to a “happy ending” through making an appropriate, attractive “match.”

However, even as Larsen seems to focus Helga's narrative on her romantic possibilities, textual cues in almost all of her potential partnerships remind the reader that it is not only in the romantic narrative that Helga will fail, but also in the narrative of "uplift" her community has established for her. Reminders of uplift discourse appear throughout the novel, in the images of reproduction and sexuality that reveal Helga's own preoccupation with motherhood in her relationships. This preoccupation is precipitated by her childhood: Helga, like Larsen herself, has a complicated relationship with her Scandinavian mother. After Helga's West Indian father leaves the family when Helga is very young, her mother marries a racist white man, subjecting Helga to rejection and ridicule throughout her childhood. Throughout most of the narrative, however, Helga is sympathetic to her mother, to the point of self-hatred. She describes Karen Nilsson as "A fair Scandinavian girl in love with life, with passion, dreaming, and risking all in one blind surrender ... A girl gently bred, fresh from an older, more polished civilization, thrown into poverty, sordidness, and dissipation" (56). In remembering her own ill-treatment as a child, at the hands of her mother and her step-family, Helga recalls "she had always been able to understand her mother's, her stepfather's, and his children's points of view. She saw herself for an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden" (62). In feeling sympathy for her mother at the same time that she feels an absolute separation from her because of their racial difference, Helga establishes an impossible paradigm for her own mothering impulses. From her perspective, the mother is simultaneously the victim—of abandonment, of poverty, and of racism—and the villain, the perpetrator of those experiences of victimhood upon her child. This paradox

is one that birth control advocates also used in portrayals of poor mothers like Karen Nilsson, “victims of biology” unable to care for their unwanted children (Capo 88), who were contrasted with the ideal “voluntary mother” (Capo 90), a figure that does not appear in *Quicksand*.

Helga’s difficulty perceiving motherhood in a positive light and her apparent ignorance of how to avoid pregnancy infiltrate all of her romantic and sexual encounters. Her first relationship in the novella, the engagement to James Vayle, is broken off when she suddenly leaves Naxos, but although she is glad to leave him behind, she remains preoccupied with his sexual overtures. On a train to Chicago, she remembers his expressions of desire with repulsion:

Acute nausea rose in her as she recalled the slight quivering of his lips sometimes when her hands had unexpectedly touched his; the throbbing vein in his forehead on a gay day when they had wandered off alone across the low hills and she had allowed him frequent kisses under the shelter of some low-hanging willows. . . . She must have been mad, she thought; but she couldn’t tell why she thought so. This, too, bothered her. (58)

A possible reason for Helga’s sudden conviction of her former madness can be found in her surroundings on the train, which are described in the paragraph immediately following the above passage: “Across the aisle a bronze baby, with bright staring eyes, began a fretful whining, which its young mother essayed to silence by a low droning croon. . . . A little distance away a tired laborer slept noisily. Near him two children dropped the peelings of oranges and bananas on the already soiled floor” (58). The juxtaposition of Helga’s disgusted meditation on James Vayle and his “throbbing vein”

with her observations of the children surrounding her in the squalid Jim Crow car is an early example of the inextricable connection Helga perceives between sexuality and motherhood, which colors all of her romantic relationships. In addition, phrases like “fretful whining,” “low droning croon,” “already soiled floor” highlight the novella’s association between parenting and poverty and racial oppression; here, it depicts all three as frustrating, boring, and gritty.

Helga’s later romantic experiences more explicitly reveal the ways in which she connects marriage to childbearing, and both to degradation. Her one positive perception of motherhood occurs in a description of her first months in Harlem, during which she is not attached to one particular suitor, but meets many eligible men: “Someday she intended to marry one of those alluring brown or yellow men who danced attendance on her. ... Helga Crane meant, now, to have a home and perhaps laughing, dark-eyed children in Harlem” (77). This vague, brief expression of desire for a nuclear family is quickly mitigated, however, when Helga decides that she is tired of Harlem society and uses an inheritance from her uncle to move to Copenhagen with her aunt. Ensclosed in Danish society with Aunt Katrina and Uncle Poul, Helga looks back with horror on her narrow escape from motherhood in racist America: “How stupid she had been ever to have thought that she could marry and perhaps have children in a land where every dark child was handicapped at the start by the shroud of color! She saw, suddenly, the giving birth to little, helpless, unprotesting Negro children as a sin, an unforgivable outrage” (104). The theme of “moral motherhood” that runs throughout the book is a subtle

reference to and subversion of negative eugenics ideology, in its implication that bearing children under certain (albeit ever-shifting) circumstances is ethically objectionable.

It becomes apparent later in the text, however, that Helga's recoiling from bearing a "dark child" offers a political veneer to a very personal preference. It turns out that Helga is disturbed not only by the idea of giving birth to Black children in America, but also by the idea of having children with a white man in Norway. Axel Olsen, the portraitist whose painting of Helga she rejects as depicting a "disgusting sensual creature," asks her to marry him, but Helga refuses in terms that recall her own difficult childhood and her fear of reproducing that misery: "It isn't just you, not just personal, you understand. It's deeper, broader than that. It's racial. . . . If we were married, you might come to be ashamed of me, to hate me, to hate all dark people. My mother did that" (118). Whether "that" refers to Helga's mother's hatred of her daughter specifically, or of "all dark people," her opinion that both miscegenation and the reproduction of "dark children" are to be avoided because of their effects on yet-unborn children reveals Helga's deep anxiety about reproduction, which is connected to her ambivalence about her childhood and her personal anxieties about sex, rather than to her adult experiences with racism.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Lydia Calloway offers a similar interpretation of this scene in *Black Family (Dys)function in Novels by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Fannie Hurst*: "So when the highly regarded artist Axel Olsen finally proposes to Helga, she decisively rejects him, based in part upon her own personal experience as a child of an interracial union, and her unwillingness to expose herself or any potential children to the risk of emotional rejection" (90).

Ultimately, Helga's conflation of motherhood and sexuality renders her anxiety about men and romance overdetermined: is she neurotic about sex because she is afraid of motherhood, or afraid of motherhood because she is neurotic (and uniformed) about sex? One way of addressing this question, which Davis has articulated, is to consider Helga's relationship with her own mother, who provides a model of racism and rejection that Helga cannot assimilate into her view of herself as a sexual being (266). The problem of Helga's identification with her mother, however, is not only psychological, but also material—Helga's mother was physically unable to control her fertility, and Helga fears that lack of control as much as she fears her desire for Olsen. The conflation of sex and reproduction in women's perspectives on desire is underexplored in literature and literary criticism; as Suzette Henke asked in 1987, "Why is it that even the boldest and most realistic writer feels powerless to articulate the problem of 'reproductive reality?'" (46).

Birth control advocates in the 1920s, on the other hand, tended to emphasize the reality that female desire was circumscribed by women's limited options for fertility control, claiming that most women's sexuality was underdeveloped because of their constant fear of unplanned pregnancies and the correlated risk to their economic or social status. An example of pro-contraception rhetoric intended to relieve women's anxieties about sex can be seen in Maude Durand Edgren's article in the July 1918 edition of the *Birth Control Review*, "Regeneration Through Sex." This piece contains a plea for women to reject the dichotomy between spirituality and sexuality, and "spiritualize" sex rather than dismissing it as wholly physical and belonging to the realm of male enjoyment. She describes the relationship between her ideal of "spiritualized sex" and

the use of birth control thus: “When a woman is free of the fear of pregnancy, when she knows she can create when and only when she desires, then she can look to the higher aspects, the regenerative aspects of the sex relations” (4). Edgren’s depiction of typical fertile women’s entrapment between the “deep sea of celibacy and the devil of sex gluttony” (3) resonates with Larsen’s depiction of Helga Crane’s anxiety about sex and pregnancy and her ultimate surrender to her desire for the Rev. Pleasant Green.

Helga in Alabama: Larsen’s Critique of the “Natural”

In the last chapters of *Quicksand*, the politics of race, class, and gender collide as Helga Crane transforms from a single, middle-class woman considering the difficulties of a transatlantic lifestyle in Harlem and Norway to a poverty-stricken mother of three and preacher’s wife in rural Alabama. Helga’s decision to marry the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green and follow him to the Deep South is startling for its embrace of religion and voluntary poverty, values that Helga has previously scorned. The decision is also ominous: before announcing her intention to marry Rev. Pleasant Green, the narrator tells us that Helga believes she has found happiness at last, but “questioned her ability to retain, to bear, this happiness at such cost as she must pay for it” (144). The appropriateness of Helga’s hesitation, and its association with pregnancy through her use of the verb “to bear,” seems immediately clear to the reader, but Helga’s physical and spiritual descent following the births of her children is still a strikingly sudden fulfillment of her previous forebodings about parenthood. Helga’s long illness following her third pregnancy, followed immediately by the advent of her fourth pregnancy mean that the book ends with a view of Helga at the mercy of continual weakness, and probably death,

caused by childbirth. Critics, including Davis, have read her downfall as a metaphor for women's artistic creativity as stifled by domestic responsibilities (275), but Helga's dire physical and emotional distress has a literal model in popular texts depicting fertility as a snare for poor or marginalized women, and I demonstrate here that Larsen used that model to critique not the symbolic, but the material conditions of motherhood. While Larsen focuses in these final chapters on images familiar to *Birth Control Review* readers, insisting on the tragic vulnerability of female bodies, and particularly Black female bodies, during pregnancy and childbirth, she complicates these images by focusing on Helga's functional and complex mental life during her physical deterioration.

It is difficult to sustain any consistent reading of *Quicksand* through these last chapters, which bring Helga's story to such a sudden and catastrophic halt. Critical readings that focus on gender (like Deborah McDowell's) describe the limitations of marital sex while glossing over the particularity of Helga's fall from relative affluence to destitution. On the other hand, readings like that of Jacquelyn Y. MacLendon, in her 1995 book *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*, insist on the primacy of the racial politics of the text and explicitly leave out gender and class. In contrast, a Marxist reading by Anthony Dawahare, "The Gold Standard of Racial Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*" (2006), does not mention Helga's children at all, concentrating on her failed philosophy of commodity fetishism and her continued fantasies of bourgeois materialism. Each of these analyses insists on the primacy of one category of oppression Helga faces (gender, race, or class), but is unable to assimilate Helga's entire experience into a single critical perspective. The complexities of Helga's

social position and its variation seem to elide the categorizations of traditional literary criticism and cultural analysis. Standing at the intersection of debates concerning gender, race, and class in 1928, however, was the birth control movement. I hope to show in this analysis of the last chapters of *Quicksand* how an understanding of Larsen's use of the rhetoric of birth control in her depiction of Helga Crane's fate in Alabama would allow such assimilation and establish a clearer understanding of the novel's stringent commentary on race, class, and gender oppression.

During her first months in the Rev. Pleasant Green's community, Helga herself turns to racial uplift. She comes to Alabama with missionary zeal, eager to be of service to Green's "scattered and primitive"⁴¹ flock" (146), the "others," as James Vayle has described them. Helga's good intentions, however, focus more on the aesthetic improvement of her community than its recovery from poverty or racism: "Her young joy and zest for the uplifting of her fellow men came back to her. She meant to subdue the cleanly scrubbed ugliness of her own surroundings to soft inoffensive beauty, and to help the other women to do likewise" (146). Like that of James Vayle and of many eugenicists, Helga's interest in "uplift" is limited by her middle-class perspective, as she seems unable to acknowledge the realities of her "beneficiaries" lives. Her ministrations

⁴¹ I have not seen it noted before that the word "primitive" here, though not elaborated on in the text of *Quicksand*, probably implied both the "backwards" nature of Helga's new community as opposed to her social circle in Harlem and that the Rev. Pleasant Green's congregation follows the Primitive Baptist religious tradition. The National Primitive Baptist Convention of the U.S.A. is an association of African-American Primitive Baptist churches that was founded in Huntsville, Alabama in 1907. That convention broke away from other Primitive Baptist groups by refuting the doctrine of predestination and instituting revival meetings like the one at which Helga is converted at in Harlem.

are, in fact, detrimental to the true needs of the congregation, as they take time away from housework and childcare: “She was unaware that [after she visited to proselytize about beauty] they would shake their heads sullenly over their washtubs and ironing boards” (147). Helga’s officious uselessness here recalls the figure of the middle-class nurse or social worker, a stock character in birth control narratives, who does not see the true (contraceptive) needs of the mothers she serves and instead provides them with meaningless cautions to “take care” not to have another child. This figure cuts both ways, of course: birth control advocates were direct descendants of the “welfare feminists” the *Birth Control Review* ridicules, not necessarily any more prepared to attend to the real issues affecting poor, immigrant, or ethnic communities (McCann 27).

While Helga’s efforts are at first associated with the cluelessness of these figures, Larsen quickly subsumes the class distinctions she invokes here: Helga’s education and previous social class, which leads to her reputation as “uppity” (147) and connects her to the racial maternalism of white birth control advocates and social workers, is rendered irrelevant, and her ideas on beauty moot, when she joins the ranks of mothers in her community. Larsen’s depiction of Helga’s rapid transformation from childless woman to mother of three (two twin boys and a younger girl), like Helga’s earlier dismissal of James Vayle, forefronts women’s objections to traditional ideas about reproduction and eugenic progress. Here, however, Larsen even more clearly uses the language of birth control discourse to demonstrate that pro-fertility advocacy is destructive not only to individual women, but to entire communities.

First of all, Larsen denigrates eugenicists' correlation between "natural" reproduction and unplanned reproduction by contrasting what is beneficial to Helga and her family with what other characters see as "natural" fertility. Exhausted during her third pregnancy, Helga wonders if the weakness and nausea she feels is normal:

How, she wondered, did other women, other mothers, manage? Could it be possible that, while presenting such smiling and contented faces, they were all always on the edge of health? Or was it only she, a poor weak city-bred thing, who felt that the strain of what the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green had so often gently and patiently reminded her was a natural thing, an act of God, was almost undendurable? (152)

Larsen dwells on the word "natural" in depicting Helga's experience: Sary Jones, a mother of six whom Helga turns to for advice, tells her to "Jes' remembah et's natu'al fo' a 'oman to hab chilluns an' don' fret so,"⁴² and Helga responds, "I'm always so tired and half sick. That can't be natural" (152). Sary's beliefs are undermined by the text of *Quicksand*, because her blind faith in religion and her failure to question her circumstances mark her as outside the rhetorical thrust of the novel. Her belief that a quick succession of childbirths is "natural" and therefore beneficial is an idea specifically

⁴² Larsen's use of dialect in Helga's conversation with Sary is unique in the novella—interestingly, even the speech of Sary's fellow Alabamian Pleasant Green's is not presented phonetically. The extreme phoneticization of Sary's speech patterns may indicate Larsen's own classism, and certainly suggests that she is not an authority to be taken seriously. Cf. Lydia Calloway, who suggests "the example of Sary Jones suggests that the comparative ease and indulgence of middle-class life in the urban metropolitan areas of the North curtail black women's abilities to manage a number of disparate tasks efficiently and simultaneously" (4).

refuted by birth control advocates. Mary Knoblauch, the editor of the *Birth Control Review*, put it thus in a 1920 editorial: “At last men and women see the folly of their past behaviour. They will no longer have more children than they can care for. ... They will be prudent, intelligent, scientific. They will plan their families with at least as much care as they plant their crops. Unnatural? No. They will not be unnatural. They will understand nature more intelligently, that is all” (3). Knoblauch’s assumption that birth control should be seen as a “scientific” tool for human survival and improvement echoes Helga’s pragmatic assessment of her own situation, her awareness that exhaustion and illness can’t be justified as “natural.”

Secondly, the contrast between Sary’s resignation to “natural” family proliferation and Larsen’s ideals of fertility limitation is evident in the correlation between the Green family’s increasing size and Helga’s and her children’s diminishing “vitality.” In the first chapter of this dissertation, I identified “vitality” as a term Stopes and Sanger both used to indicate a healthy sex drive and also the strength (sometimes genetic, sometimes circumstantial) to bear healthy children. In their formulations, “vitality” abounds in healthy marriages, but is conserved by limiting reproduction; it dissipates, among both mothers and their children, when families grow too large to maintain their health. Early in her marriage, Helga’s lust for her husband equals her happiness in serving his congregation, and gives her a first satisfying taste of sexual fulfillment: “And night came at the end of every day. Emotional, palpitating, amorous, all that was living in her sprang like rank weeds at the tingling thought of night, with a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason” (149-50). The passage’s reference to “all that was living in her”

resonates with the term “vitality” here to highlight Helga’s recognition of the centrality of sexuality to her identity and happiness. The contrast of vitality with reason, though, and the description of the “rank weeds” of Helga’s passion indicate that she is not wisely conserving her strength, foreshadowing the degradation that will follow her expression of sexual desire. Larsen highlights the contrast between potentially positive unfettered sexuality and uniformly negative uncontrolled fertility by using the word “vitality” later on with a totally different connotation: Helga’s fourth child, who dies within its first week of life, “Just closed his eyes and died. No vitality” (158). This catastrophe is the end result of a diminishment of both sexual and non-sexual “vitality” that has characterized Helga’s experience as a mother.

However, Helga’s loss of vitality in her marriage and her physical body begins long before the death of her child, the culmination of her disastrous experiences with parenthood:

The children used her up. There were already three of them, all born within the short space of twenty months. Two great healthy twin boys, whose lovely bodies were to Helga like rare figures carved out of amber, and in whose sleepy and mysterious black eyes all that was puzzling, evasive, and aloof in life seemed to find expression. ... And there was a girl, sweet, delicate, and flowerlike. Not so healthy or so loved as the boys, but still miraculously her own proud and cherished possession.

So there was no time for the pursuit of beauty, or for the uplifting of other harassed and teeming women, or for the instruction of their neglected children. (150)

This quotation summarizing Helga's experience as a mother echoes key assumptions common in birth control movement rhetoric. In a variation on mainline eugenic arguments, Sanger argued that it was not inherited weakness, but the actual production of large families that led to "feble-mindedness" and poor breeding (McCann 111). In a 1920 article called "Birth Control and Racial Betterment," she claims, "The fruits of the most perfect eugenic marriage are likely to be bad health in the mother and in the later children, if Birth Control is not utilized for the purpose of properly spacing the progeny" (12). In another 1920 article in the *Birth Control Review*, entitled "Babies—The Workingman's Luxury," Gertrude Williams states, "Only second in horror to the infant mortality rates are the statistics showing the inferior physique and vitality of the children born in the large families of the poor" (11). From this perspective, infant mortality in poor, large families is the expression of a progressive debilitation of both children and mother caused by over-fertility. *Quicksand* illustrates this point in its depiction of the difference between Helga's first children, "great healthy twin boys," and her third, "not so healthy or so loved."⁴³ Helga, as a representative of the "top of her race," as James

⁴³ Michelle Lee has suggested to me that it is significant that it is Helga's *daughter* that is "not so healthy nor so loved." The "not so healthy or so loved" daughter may represent another manifestation of Helga's, and Larsen's, sense of her own less valuable place in her family. The connotation of a less healthy daughter also draws attention to the contrast between the importance of strong sons (to be soldiers, farmers and statesmen) and strong daughters (to bear and raise healthy children) to racial uplift and eugenics movements.

Vayle would put it, or self-evidently “good stock” as Robert Anderson describes her (55), produces ideal children in her twin boys, but as her strength is exhausted, so is her ability to participate in “uplift,” either by educating the women around her or by passing on healthy genetic material to her offspring.

In addition, the above passage’s specific reference to Helga’s physical (“the children used her up”) and spiritual (“there was no time for the pursuit of beauty”) deterioration is indicative of *Quicksand*’s resonance with birth control texts’ assumptions about the inability of poverty-stricken mothers to maintain their health in the face of constant fertility. Her third pregnancy transforms Helga from a complex, questioning character who challenges the views of those around her to one characterized by an impersonal submission reminiscent of birth control advocates’ representations of poor mothers who lack control over their reproductive and social lives. “Humbled and oppressed” by her conversation with Sary Jones, she attempts to emulate Sary’s attitude for the rest of her pregnancy, forgoing both complaints about her situation and preparation for the birth of her child: “So, though with growing yearning she longed for the great ordinary things of life, hunger, sleep, freedom from pain, she resigned herself to doing without them ... Secretly she was glad that she had not to worry about herself or anything. It was a relief to be able to put the entire responsibility on someone else” (153). Helga’s simultaneous loss of biological and emotional/ethical power conforms to Stacy Alaimo’s argument that sanctions against contraception arise from an impulse to place women’s bodies “outside the domain of cultural intervention and human agency” (128). Privileging “God’s will” over “human agency,” Green’s congregation accepts Helga’s

abdication from rebellion enthusiastically: “The womenfolk spoke more kindly and more affectionately of the preacher’s Northern wife. ‘Pore Mis’ Green, wid all dem small chilluns at once. ... An’ she don’ nebah complains an’ frets no mo’e. Jes’ trus’ in de Lawd lak de Good Book say” (153). The approval of the undifferentiated “womenfolk” signals Helga’s entrapment in “unfit” African-American society at this point in the novel: more cautionary tale than heroine, she (temporarily) loses her middle-class subjectivity when she accepts the inevitability of her pregnancy and the desirability of following her neighbors’ examples of closed-mouthed endurance of a “natural” pattern of childbearing.

“Whimsical and Unsatisfied”: The Mind/Body Dichotomy of *Quicksand*’s Last Pages

In the writing of birth control advocates in the 1910’s and 20’s, women in Helga’s economic circumstances are usually represented as simply victims of circumstances, often nameless and usually recounting similar stories of over-fertility, illness, and destitution. This perspective is most clearly demonstrated in *Birth Control Review* columns containing first- and third-person accounts from urban slums and hospitals and in Sanger’s published collections of letters sent to her by desperate women. Poverty-stricken, over-fertile mothers’ stories provide concrete examples of physical weakness, moral degradation, marital dissolution, and economic destitution caused by lack of access to contraception. Birth control advocates were explicit and melodramatic about the intended effects of these frequently repeated tales of woe: a 1920 article prefaces a litany of quotations from impoverished women with the statement, “Brief quotations from typical letters will give some sense of what the laws refusing

contraceptive information to women mean in terms of blood and agony” (Williams 11). Such writings portray poor women, and by often by implication women of color and immigrant women, as limited by economic circumstances, helplessly dependent on their medical practitioners (who often do not treat them well or at all) and relying for their real salvation on the activism of birth control advocates, who hold the key to their safety and prosperity but are forbidden from distributing their knowledge by oppressive U.S. law.

In 1920, the *Birth Control Review* published a monthly column entitled “Hard Facts: Letters from a Nurse’s Notebook,” which was made up of narratives of individual mothers seeking help at a medical clinic that could not legally distribute information about contraception. Each section of the column begins similarly: “Beckie M.—36 years old, married 12 years. 8 living children”; “Ella R. 40 years. 7 living children.” Ella R.’s story exemplifies the generalizing approach of this column: “Patient did not want any more children as life was such a struggle ... She said she had induced abortions twice previously and all had gone well. She did not know why she should be so ill this time. As in so many cases where these overburdened mothers resort to any means to escape having the unwanted child and heavier burden—there are so many times, as in this case, the fatal ‘once too often’ and a home of motherless children” (20). The phrases “as in so many cases,” and “there are so many,” as well as the clinical tone of the passage illustrate the *BCR*’s sympathetic but anti-subjective views of poor mothers. While the intent of these columns was to alter U.S. laws limiting women’s reproductive choice, they also served to solidify poor women’s identities as victims and limit their subjectivity and agency within the movement.

Helga's own victimhood is solidified by the shock of a bad childbirth, the effects of which are as much psychological as physical. Larsen's narration downplays the drama of birth itself, saying only, "It seemed, for some reason, not to go off just right." Her description of Helga's emotional state following the birth is detailed, however:

And when, after that long frightfulness, the fourth little dab of amber humanity which Helga had contributed to a despised race was held before her for maternal approval, she failed entirely to respond properly to this sop of consolation for the suffering and horror though which she had passed. There was from her no pleased, proud smile, no loving, possessive gesture, no manifestation of interest in important matters of sex and weight. Instead she deliberately closed her eyes, mutely shutting out the sickly infant, its smiling father, the soiled midwife, the curious neighbors, and the tousled room. (154)

The sharp distinction between Helga's attitude toward her third child, "her own proud and cherished possession," and her fourth is so strong that her disinterest seems a radically disturbing departure from character, particularly in the context of Helga's distress about being an unwanted child herself. As a continuation of Larsen's characterization of Helga as a tragically over-fertile exemplar of birth control rhetoric, however, this change in attitude is a logical step. The ultimate tragedy of the unhealthy mother of many children in birth control literature is that she loses her ability to feel motherly toward her children. Sanger describes such women generally in *Woman and the New Race*: "Grievous as is her material condition, her spiritual deprivations are still greater. By the very fact of its existence, mother love demands its expression toward the

child. ... The mother of too many children, in a crowded home where want, ill health, and antagonism are perpetually created, is deprived of this simplest personal expression” (52). During the difficult birth of her fourth child, Helga loses her ability to express “mother love,” and thus becomes further identified with the women of Sanger’s tragedies. Larsen’s insistence on stripping away the sentimentalism of motherhood in this depiction of Helga’s reaction to childbirth emphasizes her value (corresponding to that of birth control advocates) of women’s lives over the idealization of reproduction. In addition, the implied correlation between the unwanted infant and its “despised race” in this passage reflects a more specific critique of positive eugenics of racial betterment in the absence of broader social change that would eliminate situations like Helga’s.

Weak from childbirth and indifferent about her recovery, Helga “hovered for a long time somewhere in that delightful borderland on the edge of unconsciousness” (155). The Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green has “the old white physician from downtown” come to see her; his visit is followed by the sojourn of “a nurse from Mobile,” but although the arrival of each is a significant event in the community, Helga ignores their attentions and only recovers when, as Larsen puts it, she “set her reluctant feet to the path of life again” (155). Although Helga dreams of escaping her life in Alabama during her brief recovery, at the end of the novel, like many of the birth control advocates’ exemplars, she is unable to avoid another pregnancy. The last sentence of *Quicksand* takes on a distant tone as Helga herself fades into poverty and obscurity with this fourth entrapping, and possibly fatal, pregnancy: “And hardly had she left her bed and become

able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child” (162).

Meredith Goldsmith, in a 2003 article, has pointed out that this final sentence flattens Helga’s character into a “type” of the poor, rural black mother, “underscor[ing] the cyclical, impersonal nature of Helga’s reproductive state” (277). My first impression of the end of this text was similar: Helga fades into the distance as a pitiful, but impersonal, victim of over-reproduction. However, Goldsmith’s claim about Helga’s “flattening” is at odds with W.E.B. DuBois’ reading of *Quicksand*; in his 1928 review, he states, “There is no ‘happy ending’ and yet the theme is not defeatist ... Helga Crane sinks at last still master of her whimsical and unsatisfied soul” (202). DuBois’s failure to grasp Larsen’s pessimistic perspective in *Quicksand* has been noted, but his specific claim that Helga retains her personality at the end of the novel sets up an interesting possibility for Larsen’s critical engagement with social activists’ “flattening” of their subjects—an engagement worth considering in an examination of the novel’s conclusion. It seems significant that Larson does bring Helga *out* of the mental stupor imposed upon her by her submission to the beliefs of her husband’s congregation, however temporarily. Following DuBois’ lead, I would like to suggest that Larsen rejects the racial and class-based de-personalization of birth control advocates by reinforcing her heroine’s subjectivity even as she is sucked into a subject-erasing cycle of fertility and poverty.

Helga’s attitude following her illness emphasizes the “whimsical and unsatisfied” aspects of her personality that DuBois commented upon. Kimberley Monda, in her 1997 critique of Helga Crane, “Self-Delusion and Self-Sacrifice in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*,”

notes that in the last chapter of the book, Helga's futile dreams of escaping Alabama seem to repeat a cycle that has persisted throughout the narrative: the useless obsession with escape without an end goal (36). Free indirect discourse expressing Helga's thoughts after her recovery from childbirth explicitly places her dreams of escape in that context: "For she had to admit that it wasn't new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree. And it was of the present and seemingly more reasonable. The other revulsions were of the past, and now less explainable" (160). The quotation may be read as tongue-in-cheek; one of the difficulties facing scholars of this novel is, indeed, the challenge of making Helga's whims for movement "explainable." It is significant, however, that the novel narrates Helga's repetition of her old pattern, and her realization of this repetition, at a moment in her life where she seems to have fallen away completely from the middle-class self who enjoyed freedom of mobility and indulged her capriciousness. Helga's insistence on continuity between her widely disparate Northern bourgeois and Southern mother identities ties the end of this book to the beginning, and Helga as a poverty-stricken Southern preacher's wife to Helga as a member of the "talented tenth" in socially mobile Harlem. Helga's repetition of this previous pattern could, therefore, be read not as a reminder of her lack of agency, but as a reassertion of her sense of herself as an autonomous being, reenacting a process that, though futile, also expresses a revolutionary personality that directly challenges the erasure of her previous self by poverty and illness.

Helga's maintenance of her middle-class identity also reasserts itself in one of her very few interactions with other people in the last pages of *Quicksand*. Early in the novel, Helga is distinguished by her love of literacy, turning to books for comfort in her distress at Naxos, and Helga carries this love through her various geographical and social movements. Upon being prohibited from reading during her recovery from childbirth, she asks her nurse Miss Harley to read Anatole France's "The Procurator of Judea" to her, reasserting by this selection her irreligiousness and her sophistication. France won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1921, and was particularly honored in the Prize presentation for his "spiritual irony" in representations of Biblical figures and Christian saints (Karlfeldt). This short story, published in 1902, depicts a conversation between Pontius Pilate and his old friend from his days in Jerusalem, Lælius Lamia, which takes place at the end of Pilate's life. Pilate's violent anti-Semitic rhetoric mirrors Helga's anger at living among "inferior" strangers with strange religious inclinations; however, his fears about the Jews' effects on Roman society also evoke themes of "race problem" rhetoric that argued that African-Americans would gain power over whites. His comment, "Since we cannot govern them, we shall be driven to destroy them" (36), reflects Helga's own anxiety about white, Christian America's desire to destroy African-American culture. As part of his anti-Semitic tirade, Pilate criticizes Lamia for his interracial affairs in Jerusalem. In his analysis of this scene, George Hutchinson argues, "The Procurator of Judaea" has to do with the way concepts of racial difference—connected with patrician practices of empire-building, slavery, and national chauvinism—contribute to the oppression of women and repression of sexuality except for purposes of producing

'racial' subjects for the state" (189). However, Pilate adopts an attitude similar to *Quicksand's* James Vayle's in relation to Lamia, his *male* colleague: "...what, above all, I blame in you is that you have not married in compliance with the law and given children to the Republic, as every good citizen is bound to do" (38). Therefore, what seems most relevant to *Quicksand* about this story is that it offers several potential points of identification for Helga: is she Pilate, persecuted by zealots in a strange land? Mary Magdalene and the Jews, treated contemptuously by those in power? Or Lamia, an exile criticized for reproductive disobedience? The variety of identities available for Helga in this last book she selects emphasizes her multitudinous points of identification with the rhetoric of race, gender, and reproduction, so that she troubles the "Hard Facts" model of representation here not only with her cultured literacy but also with her resistance to classification.

Perhaps exhausted by the possibilities, Helga falls asleep before Miss Hartley finishes reading her the story, which ends with Pontius Pilate declaring that among the many Jews he executed, he does not remember the name "Jesus of Nazareth." Monda reads Helga's slumber as a sign of her lack of self-awareness, which, she claims, allows Helga to "retreat into 'pie in the sky' dreams of luxury, ease, and sophistication that allow her to endure Green's unwanted advances and to risk death by childbirth" (37). Monda is referring to the fact that Helga becomes pregnant despite her disgust with Green following her recovery from childbirth. However, her interpretation implies that Helga has much more agency over her sexual and reproductive life than she does at this point in the novel; rather than falling asleep out of a refusal to recognize her own ironic

entrapment, and having sex with her husband out of a lack of will, Helga asserts herself within the impossibilities of her situation by insisting on displaying both her literary taste and her disgust with the Reverent Pleasant Green during her recovery. (At one point he comes to visit her and is clearly aroused by seeing her in her “flimsy” nightgown, and she responds with pleasure to his unfulfilled lust: “Helga’s petulant lip curled, for she well knew that this fresh reminder of her desireability was like the flick of a whip” (156).) In addition, Helga’s choice of France’s tale leads Miss Hartley to read “the superbly ironic ending” herself out of curiosity: the nurse’s dismissal of the text as “silly” underscores the difference between the women, highlighting Helga’s cultural knowledge and her iconoclastic tendencies, two characteristics that have marked her as unique throughout the text.

In the last few pages of *Quicksand*, Helga not only maintains key aspects of her pre-marriage personality, but also comes to a greater knowledge of herself than she has exhibited earlier in the text. Specifically, Helga realizes that she has been denying her love for Robert Anderson throughout her adult life. Musing during her long recovery about the people who have meant the most to her, she lists “Robert Anderson, questioning, purposefully detached, affecting, she realized now, her life in a remarkably cruel degree, for at last she understood clearly how deeply, how passionately, she must have loved him” (155). After enjoying an illicit kiss with Anderson at a party, Helga fantasizes about being in a relationship with him (though she “did not envy [Anne’s] marriage” (134)). She invites him to her hotel to begin an affair, only to find that his intention is to apologize to her for kissing her and go back to his wife, an announcement

that precipitates Helga's fateful journey to the storefront church where she meets Green. Anderson thus represents not only Helga's one romantic rejection, but also the only relationship possibility she imagines outside the fixed path of marriage and children that has troubled her throughout the novel. Could Helga's fate have been different if she had chosen not marriage, but a carefully managed affair with an educated, middle-class married man? In naming Anderson the significant love interest of Helga's life, Larsen suggests that a relationship with him could have broken the cycle of unhappy motherhood that preoccupies and eventually consumes her heroine. This reintroduction of Anderson emphasizes Larsen's point that it is Helga's poverty *and* her motherhood that lead her to the erasure and degradation that characterize the last part of her life. The contrast Helga invokes here between her potential life with Anderson and her actual life as a wife and mother in Alabama also makes more palpable her apparent ignorance of contraceptive techniques, as Robert and his childless wife Anne represent the knowledge, restraint, and caution common to *Birth Control Review* and Harlem Renaissance depictions of middle-class families with few or no children.

Helga's reassertion of her personality in this section of the text is complicated and rebellious, in keeping with her character throughout the book. She rails against religion as well as racist violence, her husband's oppression of her as well as the oppression of "the white man's God," and Larsen ultimately describes her as having an "all-embracing hatred" (161). While the end of the book is characterized by tragedy, marked by this hatred and culminating with Helga's devastating fourth pregnancy, the force and complexity of Helga's emotions in the last pages of this novel explore the subjectivity of

poor black mothers in a way that troubles the totalizing narratives of birth control advocates in the 1920s. In most birth control texts, women fall into two characterizations—middle-class women with a highly subjective awareness of their fertility and an ability to control it, and poor (often immigrant or minority) women who are objects of pity or scorn for their uncontrolled reproductive function. Helga in *Quicksand* has the status of what Jennifer M. Wilks has termed the “atypical woman,” who through her resistance (often subtle or seemingly futile) to stereotypical categories challenges male-centered, Euro-centric narratives of social and technological progress (Wilks 2, 11). By placing her middle-class, educated heroine in the circumstances of a poverty-stricken exemplar of bad reproductive behavior, Larsen not only complicates the ideals of eugenic breeding and “uplift” that Helga has struggled with throughout *Quicksand*, but also challenges the categories imposed on conversations about reproduction and race by the broader birth control movement and its supporters.

Finally, then, *Quicksand* is not only a book about a single woman seeking romance or about a mother overwhelmed by the burdens of reproduction and poverty, but about the transitions between these states, and the slipperiness of these transitions that undermines the strict categorization of racial uplift, eugenics, and birth control advocates into “us”—the “fit” middle class—and “the others”—the poor, uneducated and often racially other-ed “unfit.” *Quicksand* demonstrates the double bind of women like Helga, caught between the racism of birth control rhetoric and the sexism of racial uplift discourse, both of which adhered to the assumption Dorothy Roberts identifies as common throughout American history: “Black women’s childbearing should be regulated

to achieve social objectives.” Recognizing Larsen’s negotiation of the affiliated discourses of birth control rhetoric and racial uplift helps us more fully appreciate the complexity of her response to twentieth century reproductive politics and its multivalenced interventions into the privacy and security of African-American women’s lives. This transatlantic novel, as it moves Helga among cities, countries, social positions, and mental states, challenges the boundaries not only of anti-contraception traditions that limited women’s agency in marriage and romantic love, but also the pro-contraception ideologies that allowed for the measuring of a woman’s worth by her contribution to the gene pool.

Chapter Four

Passion's Possibilities: Desire and the Birth Control Movement in Kate

O'Brien's *Without My Cloak*

“‘We’re going to have another baby, Anthony.’”

They stopped in the walk. His voice was graver than she had ever heard it when he answered her.

‘Oh my little girl, I’m sorry for that.’”

Kate O’Brien, *Without My Cloak* (115)

A recurring figure in birth control activists’ writing is the woman who suffers through too many childbirths, finding herself beaten down and physically weak, or weary and poverty-stricken from caring for a multitude of children. In Kate O’Brien’s *Without My Cloak*, Molly Considine is such a figure, although as a middle-class Irish woman, she is restricted from using contraception not by poverty but by the teachings of Catholicism. The novel’s depiction of her and her husband Anthony’s regret over her many pregnancies is only one of its references to birth control and its politics. O’Brien thoroughly documents the gap between Molly’s and Anthony’s desires and the realities of parenthood in terms of their cultural position as Irish Catholics: “[Molly] knew that [Anthony] deplored for her the discomfort of incessant childbearing and would do much to lessen it, but saw no help within the social and religious code they both upheld” (76-7). However, while *Without My Cloak* is in part a significant post-birth-control movement text because of its insistence on pitting the ideas of advocates like Marie Stopes against depictions of traditional Catholic society, O’Brien also goes farther than most of these

advocates by exploring the limitations of Stopes's heteronormative writings on sexuality. O'Brien's portrayals of failed relationships among the Irish middle class ultimately reveal that neither Catholic tradition nor birth control advocates' didactic insistence on heterosexual marriage as the only path to sexual and romantic satisfaction can ultimately fulfill the myriad of desires experienced by even the most repressed human bodies.

Without My Cloak: Text and Context

In 1920, two years after Stopes' bestseller *Married Love* was published, Kate O'Brien left her home in Limerick to go to work for the *Manchester Guardian*, beginning her long career as an Irish literary expatriate. O'Brien's career and her affiliations in London gave her access to the burgeoning discourse on sexology and fertility control in 1920s England, including Marie Stopes' popular works. Though the *London Times* refused to review *Married Love* (Hall 147), its commercial success earned Stopes invitations to write for other London publications, including the *Weekly Dispatch* (later the *Sunday Dispatch*) and the working class newsletter *John Bull* (150). In 1920, O'Brien's employer, *The Manchester Guardian*, gave a glowing review to Stopes's *Radiant Motherhood*, calling it "valuable, simple and safe guide through the perplexities that are in store for most married people" (qtd. in *Wise Parenthood*, n.p.). Several years later, in 1923, Stopes's libel trial against Catholic doctor Halliday Sutherland gained her publicity and sympathy from the press, including the *Manchester Guardian* (237). Though Stopes' views on eugenics and her political affiliations mark her as ultimately quite conservative, her stance on birth control and the lengthy Sutherland trial led to her

prominence within anti-Catholic, pro-sexual freedom circles in England throughout the 1920s.

While she does not mention Stopes in *Without My Cloak*, the wide popularity of Stopes' works and their currency among London intellectuals in the 1920s strongly suggest that O'Brien would have been aware of the birth control movement (Walshe 47),⁴⁴ particularly because discussions of women's rights and sexual health issues were then at the forefront of both English and Irish social thought. During O'Brien's first years away from Ireland, the development of native legislation revealed a preoccupation on the part of Irish clergy and lawmakers with women's sexuality and reproductive issues, a preoccupation that would find its ultimate expression in De Valera's 1937 Constitution, which restrictively codified the roles of Irish women. The years during which O'Brien wrote *Without My Cloak*, which was published on December 3, 1931 (Walshe 50),⁴⁵ overlapped with the release of several reports on state of sexual morality and reproductive health in Ireland, including those of the Inquiry Regarding Venereal Disease (1925), the Committee on Evil Literature (1927), and the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts (the Carrigan Report) (1931); these committees represented collaborations between the Catholic Church and Irish legislators that resulted in formal legislation related to censorship, illegitimacy, maternity homes, dance halls, and the age

⁴⁴ In his 2006 biography, Eibhear Walshe describes O'Brien's community in London in the 1920s as "professional, university educated and independent women—academics, painters, writers, translators."

⁴⁵ There is some confusion about the publication of *Without My Cloak*, because the Virago editions list the copyright year as 1936, but it was first put out by Heinemann in 1931, on O'Brien's thirty-fourth birthday.

of consent (Smith 208-9). The most significant of these laws to my argument here is the Censorship of Publications Act (1929), which forbade the publication or circulation of information related to contraception,⁴⁶ as well as of “illicit” literature, a category that eventually included O’Brien’s *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *The Land of Spices* (1941). In *Without My Cloak*, O’Brien challenges the limitations posed by the Irish Censorship Board and the Catholic Church by highlighting the ways in which cultural prejudices against contraception limited women’s social roles and posed a danger to their health, avoiding overt references to contraceptive techniques, but employing rhetorical tropes and strategies that tie her characters’ tragic experiences of marriage and reproduction to the well-known language of birth control politics.

Without My Cloak was not only a financial and a critical triumph in 1931, selling 50,000 copies in several months and winning the Hawthornden and James Tait Black memorial prizes, but also remained popular for many years, staying in print (unlike several of her novels) until the 1970s (Walshe 51-54). Despite its commercial success, however, *Without My Cloak* has received very little critical attention. O’Brien’s biographer Eibhear Walshe claims that she did not particularly like *Without My Cloak* (58); possibly, like several of her critics, she considered the novel too tied to the generic conventions of the family saga to qualify as a significant literary work. Following the model of Galsworthy’s *The Forsyte Saga*, *Without My Cloak* describes the marriages and

⁴⁶ Chrystal Hug notes that in discussion leading up to the Censorship of Publications Act, “...the Minister for Justice was adamant that birth control propaganda would not even be discussed in Parliament (since its advocacy was in fact propaganda against the Irish race), and he declared: ‘We have decided, call it dogmatically if you like, that this question shall not be freely and openly discussed’” (79).

business careers of several generations of the upwardly mobile Considine family of Mellick, a city that stands in for O'Brien's hometown of Limerick. The plot follows the individual and romantic development of several Considines, though it ends with an extended chapter focused solely on Denis, the "most promising" grandson of patriarch Honest John Considine. Its themes, on the surface at least, are family loyalty, romance, and the individual's role in society. Focusing narrowly on these themes, few literary critics have attempted to look beyond *Without My Cloak's* surface representation of Irish bourgeois culture. For example, Joan Ryan's 1984 article "Class and Creed in Kate O'Brien," focuses on the "photographic detail" (127) with which O'Brien describes the Irish-Catholic bourgeoisie, while skimming over the complex sex and gender-related issues O'Brien's characters face (or refuse to face) in their personal lives. In the chapter on *Without My Cloak* in her 1990 monograph on O'Brien, Adele Dalsimer similarly focuses on O'Brien's portrayal of the Irish middle-class and her narrative connections to *The Forsyte Saga*. Dalsimer's criticism of O'Brien's characters' consumerist, aristocratic ethos make her article one of the most in-depth analyses available of O'Brien's portrayal of the Mellick bourgeoisie; however, her overview of *Without My Cloak* does not do justice to the book's subtle references to contemporary social, religious, and sexual mores, which set it apart from its genre.

Despite the broad treatment such ideas receive in writing on *Without My Cloak*, O'Brien scholars rarely fail to acknowledge her consistent critique of Irish Catholicism and the limitations it places on her characters' romantic and personal options. Walshe notes that as a practicing lesbian, O'Brien "parted company radically with other Irish

Catholic intellectuals...on the issue of sexuality and sexual freedom.” Though Walshe suggests that O’Brien’s enduring engagement with Catholic tradition allowed her to “invent a version of Irish Catholicism in her novels where individual conscience and personal choice in moral issues was possible” (50), as O’Brien’s first extended meditation on Catholicism *Without My Cloak* includes few references to its characters’ rethinking the religious values they have imbibed through family tradition. Rather, Catholicism is a stable, oppressive cultural background to the Considines’ lives. As Dalsimer notes, the Considines’ “creed and caste ensure entrapment and the impossibility of personal freedom” (64), not circumscribing their spiritual development but enforcing their outward adherence to social codes, up to the point of sacrificing their health and happiness in order to adhere to religious conventions in their marriage relationships. Ryan points out, for example, that the novel’s themes of Catholic ritual and obedience are visible “in the amount and frequency of births” among Considine family members (129). The text’s descriptions of extremely large middle- and upper-class families are ahistorical, as population researchers have determined that in Ireland in the 1860’s and 70’s, the years following the Famine, family size was actually in decline, particularly among the wealthy (Gunnaine 248-52). However, O’Brien’s representation of the Considines’ large families resonates strongly with both the history of the Catholic Church’s prohibitions against contraception, which became more stringent in the 1870’s (McLaren 195), and the attention birth control advocates in the 1920’s paid to Catholic campaigns against contraception. O’Brien’s emphasis on aspects of Church doctrine that place a reproductive imperative on all sexual relationships highlights this text’s

investment in the argumentative strategies as well as the ideals of the English birth control movement.

Although not prominent in criticism of *Without My Cloak*, examinations of O'Brien's representations of female sexuality and same-sex desire are frequent in scholarship on her later novels. The richness and sympathy of O'Brien's descriptions of homosexual love affairs is highly significant, particularly when compared with her depictions of unhappy heterosexual relationships. In a 1993 article, Ailbhe Smyth argues that throughout her corpus, O'Brien uses affection between women as a counter-narrative to the male-centered plot lines of conventional "lady writers" (27): "Kate O'Brien was censored because her heroines expose and, to differing degrees, resist the bondage of patriarchy and all its paraphernalia—family, marriage, property, religion, class, and all the rest of it" (31). I would argue that in dismissing as "paraphernalia" the complex systems upon which O'Brien's characters' lives are built, Smyth fails to illuminate the full significance of the tie between male-dominated social institutions and heterosexual love relationships in O'Brien's work. O'Brien does indeed posit same-sex relationships as an alternative to patriarchal Irish (and European) culture, but I hope to show in this chapter that O'Brien responded to a particular debate over the roles of women—as mothers and as lovers—in heterosexual relationships, employing ideas from Marie Stopes's texts to craft an argument for a liberated sexuality for both men and women. I will show that at the same time as Stopes was expanding her advocacy for women's sexual pleasure and reproductive choice into a comprehensive argument about marriage relationships, O'Brien was dramatizing those ideas by depicting a society within which

women, as well as men, are bound to heteronormative ideals that do not account for women's sexual pleasure or adjust to deal with its consequences.

“Honest John’s Children”: Motherhood and Patriarchy in Mellick

The first long section of *Without My Cloak* is entitled “Honest John and His Children,” and it introduces the novel’s first generation of main characters: the eight children of Honest John, the patriarch of the Considine clan. Despite many digressions into various characters’ narratives, the three of these children that the novel follows most closely are Anthony and Eddy Considine, the two sons who run the family forage-selling business, Considine & Co., and Caroline Lanigan, one of Honest John’s two married daughters. The reference in this section title to the “children” of Honest John emphasizes this adult family’s infantile dependence on their father’s financial and emotional support. Fatherhood, and the control of the father over his (preferably large) family is a theme throughout the novel; at its opening, the Considines are a traditional, patriarch-ruled family, whose lives are ordered by the prejudices, financial fortunes, and goodwill of its ruling member, Honest John. However, the section title’s reference to “children” also highlights the subtextual challenges to that patriarchy and its insistence on women’s constant childbearing that arise in this first part of her book. A close reading of the numerous references to children, parents, childbearing, and its avoidance in these chapters reveals O’Brien’s insertion of the rhetoric of 1920’s reproductive politics into this nineteenth-century Irish family romance.

In this section, O’Brien juxtaposes two different perspectives on large families, which call attention to the differences between the assumed and actual costs and benefits

of childbirth for middle-class Irish-Catholic women. On the one hand, descriptions of widower Honest John's family size emphasize the social position his large clan helps him maintain in Mellick: "his eldest son was a doctor; his second son a priest; two sons were in his business with him; two of his daughters were honorably married in the town; one daughter was a nun, and his youngest, Agnes, was the companion of his fireside; he had twenty-five grandchildren and possessed the means to provide well for all of them" (16). Here, Honest John's many children are uncomplicatedly positive assets, personally and socially. On the other hand, although descriptions of Honest John's daughters also note the size of their families as assets to their status in the community, they are less celebratory. This passage in reference to the oldest Considine daughter Teresa and her family retains the presumed importance of multiple children to one's social standing, while also subtly undermining it: "After her marriage [Teresa] became once more and remained the strongest pillar among them of the family pride. Danny and she had so far contributed eight to Honest John's quota of grandchildren, the eight plainest perhaps, but indubitably eight grandchildren" (40). The tone here is more ambivalent about the value of the large family. O'Brien's unvarnished depiction of Teresa's children as simply "the eight plainest" in Honest John's list of family possessions mocks the value the Considines place on children as commodities rather than human beings. Her challenge to the assumption that many children are inherently valuable to a family echoes a central birth control movement principle, expressed by Margaret Sanger in *The Pivot of Civilization*: "quality is everything, quantity is nothing" (203).

More seriously critical of the Considines' desire to incessantly increase their numbers is O'Brien's description of the beautiful but unhappy Caroline Lanigan:

She was very like Anthony, with his vitality and glow of health, attributes that had brought her gallantly through much childbearing. Her eyes were brilliant lightening-blue; her hair was the fairy-tale raven's wing, and the fairy-tale blood-red came and went in her cheeks. But Honest John was deceived in thinking the years had not touched her, and so was Anthony. For the beauty that had glowed with such softness in her once was burning frostily now and with too crisp a flame had they but known, and the once ingenuous eyes were guarded. (41-2).

Caroline's beauty and good health mark her outwardly as a eugenically "fit" mother of six as well as a romance heroine, but her "guarded eyes" and "burning" indicate the secret dissatisfaction that actually unfits her for both roles, and will eventually consume her outward correctness. Although Caroline's bad marriage, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, is most directly the cause of her apparent neuroses, when O'Brien emphasizes the child-like fragility of Caroline's "fairy-tale" features, she simultaneously mentions her status as a mother who has experienced "much childbearing," subtly referencing the physical dangers of childbirth and its toll on women's "vitality."

However, it is in reference to Molly Considine, Anthony's wife, that allusions to childbearing are most frequent and most ominous in *Without My Cloak*. Molly and Anthony's marriage is the happiest male-female relationship in the novel. It is depicted as a romantic and sexual fulfillment that embarrasses their more repressed relations: when

Molly shows her critical sisters-in-law around the couple's new home, they critique her artless, "dreamy" decorating choices in every room except her own: "Flowers again, and blue silk hangings on the bed, and over everything the half-murmur of a secret. Why did Teresa say nothing? Did she, for she was intelligent, feel her modesty offended? Did she apprehend that this was the room of a woman much desired of her husband and willing to be desired?" (49). However, Anthony and Molly's relationship is also consistently characterized by the lack of control both partners feel over the consequences of frequent sexual union for their growing family. An early depiction of Molly through Anthony's eyes mingles sensual adoration with awareness of the physical effects of childbearing: "How lovely she was! Five years of marriage, three births within that time and this new pregnancy, had indeed dimmed the morning radiance that Anthony had wooed, but the warm candle-beams made little of that to-night. ... She was all woman, all fragility" (27). This quotation, from the first scene in the novel in which Molly and Anthony appear together, establishes their intense sexual attraction to each other, while also providing the first hint that neither Molly's body nor her personality is suited to such relentless childbearing. Ironically, Anthony thinks of Molly's childbearing—the result of his desire for her—as diminishing her desirability, but as long as "warm candle-beams" disguise her physical flaws, he seems willing to ignore them.

Despite Anthony's seeming callousness toward Molly's "dimming" beauty, these characters' recognition of the gap between their reproductive preferences and their actual options is what distinguishes O'Brien's portrayal of Molly and Anthony Conside as a representation of birth control ideology. At the party at Honest John's house that closes

the first section of the novel, Anthony feels intense passion for Molly, but attempts to remember his resolution against risking another pregnancy for her:

Ever since Molly's fourth child had been born thirteen months ago Anthony had been trying to be abstemious with what the law called his conjugal rights. To fast completely from the passion Molly could rouse in him was out of the question, but he had sought deliberately to discipline it of late and had been surprised and not a little proud over his uncharacteristic restraints. Luck was rewarding his comparative austerity, and Molly had had thirteen months of freedom from conception. Anthony hoped her rest would be prolonged; indeed, if she never had another child, he would be well content with his modest four. (76)

Immediately following this passage from Anthony's perspective is the quotation used at the beginning of this chapter to demonstrate Molly's sense of entrapment within the "social and religious code they both upheld." This passage continues, "He knew that childbirth frightened her, wilted and crushed her and gave her in her babies only very slender compensation, for she was by nature far more wife than mother. But it was a problem which they could never thrash out ... if not loving each other perfectly at all times and in all regions of love [they were] yet doomed to find a terrible delight, again and again, each in the other's body" (77). The fatality implied in these passages and their references to "luck" and "doom" are significant to O'Brien's portrayal of these characters as struggling not only in a more traditional moral battle of passion versus self-control, but also in an arbitrary, biologically-predetermined game of chance between physical pleasure and physical pain and danger for Molly. O'Brien's explicit depiction of this

couple's desire to limit their family size, and their inability to do so out of ignorance or because of the requirements of their religion, parallels the tragic circumstances birth control advocates repeatedly and dramatically deplored among their readers, just as Molly's fate will parallel that of the real-life mothers Stopes often used as evidence for her arguments in favor of contraception.

Thus, the first section of *Without My Cloak* establishes O'Brien's critique of the Irish middle-class she portrays and their insistence not only on "family affection and duty" in the tradition of the Victorian family saga (Walshe 52), but also on an ideal of fertility that is in conflict with the value they supposedly place on the well-being of family members, particularly women. Stopes's condemnation of this ideal in *Married Love* coincides with Anthony's concerns for Molly and reveals him to be a relatively enlightened husband according to the dictates of birth control discourse:

Some people, while awake to the claims of the unborn, nay, even of the unconceived, are blind to the claims of the one who should be dearest of all to the husband, and for whose health and happiness he is responsible. A man swayed by archaic dogma will allow, even coerce, his wife to bear and bring forth an infant annually. Save where the woman is exceptional, each child following so rapidly on its predecessor, saps and divides the vital strength which is available for the making of the offspring. This generally lowers the vitality of each succeeding child, and surely even if slowly, may murder the woman who bears them. (87)

Stopes here claims that multiple pregnancies "sap and divide" women's "vital strength," as O'Brien describes Molly as "wilted and crushed" by childbirth; both blame religious

“dogmas” and “codes” for the enforcement of repeated childbearing upon women. What I think is significant here is that O’Brien uses images and ideas from birth control discourse to focus in her family romance plot on women’s bodies as well as women’s desires. While bringing its romance partnerships to their appropriate celebratory or tragic (mostly tragic) conclusions, *Without My Cloak* insists that we pay attention to the ways that women are not only social actors in these relationships, but are also acted upon, in ways that violate their physical and mental health, throughout the duration of their reproductive lives, both by their husbands and by a social system that prevents continued health and sexual satisfaction from co-existing in heterosexual relationships. This insistence establishes the ideology of O’Brien’s first novel as consonant with the reproductive ideals of the birth control movement.

While the first section of *Without My Cloak* introduces Honest John’s children and their chief marital and familial difficulties, the plot of O’Brien’s novel does not really begin until after Honest John’s death, when Anthony takes control of Considine and Co., and the family’s wealth and importance in their community increase significantly. As Anthony’s self-importance and responsibility as the head of his family grows, his self-denying interest in Molly’s health apparently does not continue: she eventually dies in labor with the couple’s ninth child. On Anthony’s first night home from a business trip to Amsterdam, where he has had sex with another woman for the first time since his marriage, Molly tells him about her pregnancy, and he reacts with pity for her: “She was only thirty-three; her youth had been given over to the weariness and pain of pregnancy; motherhood had taken her vigour and was taking her beauty too—all for him” (115-6). It

is Molly who comforts Anthony here, saying, “Perhaps I don’t love [children] as some women seem to. But oh, I love *you*, I love *you*” (116). Despite the novel’s former sympathy for Anthony and his concerns for Molly’s health, this ironic confession from Molly, who is unaware of Anthony’s adultery, highlights the difference between men’s and women’s sacrifice for their mutual passion. Significantly, however, Anthony’s adultery confirms another typical birth control movement argument: that a husband who must control his “passions” to save his wife from further pregnancies is likely to express them elsewhere. In a 1919 contribution to the *Birth Control Review*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman expressed the dilemma in verse:

“And still the wailing babies come and go,
And homes are waste, and husbands’ hearts fly far,
There is no hope until you dare to know
The thing you are!” (13)

Gilman’s reference to “the thing you are” may refer to knowledge of anatomy and birth control, or it may refer to women’s awareness of their subordinate roles in society; either case could easily apply to O’Brien’s indictment of the traditional gender roles that eat away at Molly and Anthony’s relationship and Molly’s physical health.

O’Brien’s depiction of Molly and Anthony’s differing attitudes toward death in childbirth echo their roles in the conversation about her ninth pregnancy. Despite Anthony’s love for his children, especially his eldest son Denis, his life is blighted by Molly’s death and his own complicity in it: “At thirty-four you’re dead. At thirty-four! Because of me—because I loved you! I took everything you had—I killed you” (122).

Molly's perspective on guilt and sexual fulfillment within marriage, however, implies that her idea of control in their relationship was both more realistic and more fatalistic than her husband's. "She had often longed to tell him that their fused desire was the only real and perfect thing for her...long ago and with open eyes she had made her own bargain with fate, attesting then that if love killed her as it might, she would have no grievance. She had had to go this way to know his love, and she was well-satisfied" (122). Though Ailbhe Smyth has suggested that Molly dies of her "silence and dependency" in her marriage (31), what seems most significant about Molly's death is not her helplessness against Anthony's advances, but the fact that O'Brien represents both characters as "desired and willing to be desired," mutually helpless against their passion for each other and the likelihood that Molly "had to go this way" if they were to express that passion in a socially sanctioned manner. O'Brien suggests that despite his shortcomings, it is not, ultimately, *Anthony* who kills Molly, but the patriarchal, intolerant, repressive culture in which he participates, and which curtails his as well as his wife's options for sexual fulfillment.

There are clear parallels between O'Brien's depiction of Molly's struggles and the melodramatic testimonials of suffering women often utilized by birth control advocates in their texts. Marie Stopes was known for her voluminous correspondence with women in circumstances like Molly's, a correspondence from which she quoted to evoke sympathy for the desperation of women without access to birth control. In 1929, Stopes published a book of such letters, entitled *Mother England*, which she called "A true history of the

common people” (v). One recurring theme in these letters is mothers’ ill-health and weakness after bearing multiple children:

I am writing to you to ask you if you will give me your advice, I have continually put it off and while I am well I am determined I will find out for myself if it is possible to do without any more children. I have already got four in six years, and my health is very poor. I am still under the doctor and I feel I cannot have another baby, apart from that it is a struggle to live and keep things going, I often wonder as the days go by if living is worth while nothing to live for only bringing children into the world. [sic] (107)

Another frequent theme was the impossible bind of desiring a healthy sex life but fearing a “fall” into another pregnancy: one letter reads, “...so please could you help Me to prevent my falling again, although still letting My Husband have his desires fulfilled may I say also my own for I am very passionate as well as He, and we have been so wonderfully happy and I do so want to make this happiness last” (52-3). In a statistical analysis of the Stopes’s correspondence, Evelyn Faulkner argues for the dire importance of such letters to their writers : “some [correspondents] were anticipating the modern pro-choice slogan ‘every child a wanted child,’ but many...were driven instinctively by fears heightened by the genuine terror that they would die” (53). Such women, like Molly Considine, exhibit a fatalistic awareness that sacrifice, pain, and death are natural consequences of heterosexual romance; however, their desperation indicates what Molly does not explicitly acknowledge, but what O’Brien surely hints at in her repeated emphasis on Molly and Anthony’s helplessness against continual fertility: that

contraceptive methods could have provided the life-saving reprieve from childbearing that Anthony wished for his wife.

“Loves Out of Order”: Caroline and Eddy Considine

O’Brien’s description of Molly and Anthony’s relationship hints at the flaws she sees in traditional marriage, but that couple is actually unique in the novel for their *happiness* together, while their relationship lasts. O’Brien’s portrayal of Anthony’s sister Caroline’s marriage to Jim Lanigan is the most melodramatic example of a more typical (read: unhappy) marriage in the Considine family. Caroline’s marital troubles are in some ways the opposite of Molly’s, as Caroline has no physical desire for the sexually inept Jim and ultimately refuses to have intercourse with him. Like Molly, Caroline is a relatively indifferent mother, with priorities other than her children, but unlike Molly, Caroline does not have another socially sanctioned outlet for emotional and physical intimacy. In a private conversation early in the novel, both Caroline and her unmarried brother Eddy identify Caroline’s children with the life she desires to leave in Mellick, citing her position as a mother as a reason for her not to contemplate suicide. Eddy asks, “And even if you could, what of the six most beautiful children in Mellick?” and Caroline responds, “You must think me very selfish, a bad mother [...] But I’m fond of them Ted. Really I am. How could I be otherwise? Only—’ She straightened herself and looked out across the river. She seemed to be seeking words to explain things that to her native shyness were inexplicable” (57). The troubling reality O’Brien hints at in Caroline’s defensiveness and confusion, of course, is that she *could* be, and perhaps is, “otherwise”—not as fond of her children as she would have Eddy (and herself) believe.

Unfortunately, as Caroline's life demonstrates, there is no place in Mellick for a woman whose chief interest and desire is neither in her husband nor in her children.

The connection Eddy and Caroline acknowledge between Caroline's children and her unhappy marital life leaves open the possibility that Caroline's rapid sequence from marriage to motherhood could be one source of that unhappiness. Such an idea resonates with Stopes's suggestion in Stopes's *Married Love* that the birth of children, by disrupting a couple's sex life, may be a cause of dissatisfaction in marriage, particularly for couples who have not "experienced the full possibilities of complete love-making" (81-2). Caroline and Jim's relationship, in fact, resembles one example Stopes provides of the hazards of childbearing early in a marriage:

[Mr. C] was manly and sufficiently virile to feel the need of sex intercourse, but he was unaware (as are so many men) of the woman's corresponding need; and he did not give his wife any orgasm. She took no pleasure, therefore, in the physical act of union, which for her was so incomplete.

Very shortly after marriage she conceived, and a child was born ten months after the wedding day.

For two years after the birth of the child her vitality was so lowered that the sex-act was to her so repugnant that she refused her husband any union ... The natural stimulation each should exert on the other had faded, so that they never experienced the mutual glow of rapture in their sex union. (81-2)

Stopes emphasizes the commonness of such scenarios by noting that “so many men” are like Mr. C. (and Jim), and by using scientific, non-evaluative terms to describe a woman trapped in a relatively common sexual dilemma. However, as O’Brien hints in emphasizing Caroline’s “native shyness,” the Considine community has no acceptable language in which to discuss either orgasmic sex (or a lack thereof) or to acknowledge the fact that children are sometimes barriers to, rather than the fulfillment of, a happy marital union. Whether Caroline and Jim could have had a happy marriage if it wasn’t for their children is not clear, but O’Brien’s emphasis on their “six beautiful children” indicates that she is at least aware of the connection between early pregnancy and sexual dissatisfaction that Stopes posits.

When Caroline is forty-two, and the oldest of her children is at university, she tries to leave Jim by running away to Eddy in London, and in a conversation with Eddy in his apartment, reveals to her brother “in the veiled terms she was fumbling for” that it is her sex life that has made her miserable in her marriage (172). On the evidence of their longstanding close relationship, Caroline perceives that Eddy is a trustworthy and knowledgeable confidant for her private disclosures. O’Brien hints here and elsewhere in the novel, however, that not only is Eddy a trustworthy brother, but also that his particular understanding of sexuality and romance give him singular insight on Caroline’s struggles. Walshe suggests that Eddy is modeled on O’Brien herself, in that he is a queer artist figure living in London in exile from his Irish community, but still intimately familiar with it (*Kate O’Brien* 52). Eddy’s homosexuality, and its positive associations with liberated sexuality, are significant context for O’Brien’s presentation of Caroline’s

drama through his eyes, the eyes of a “connoisseur of love and passion” (173), whose sympathy for his sister is heightened by his own sense of unease within his family and the pleasure he is able to take in living outside the sexual conventions that seem to destroy her.

Eddy’s unspoken response to Caroline’s confession of her sexual frustration demonstrates his role as a mouthpiece for O’Brien’s familiarity with the discourse on sexuality of which Stopes’s work had become a popular mainstream representation:

If only Jim had had the very ordinary fortune to give back to his wife the sensual release he took from her—ah, then, what a happy man he would have been! ... That was all Caroline had asked—and here she was, at forty-two, still beautiful and warm, with her nerves frayed to tatters from loathing of a man’s desire, from disturbance and frustration of her senses. A physiological commonplace—that was all Caroline’s trouble. (173)

This analysis resonates unmistakably with passages like the following, from *Married Love*: “But as things are today it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the majority of wives are left wakeful and nerve-racked [after intercourse] to watch with tender motherly brooding, or with bitter and jealous envy, the slumbers of the men who, through ignorance and carelessness, have neglected to see that they too had the necessary resolution of nervous tension” (61-2). Both O’Brien and Stopes are reflecting theories expressed in Freud’s 1908 “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness,” in which he argues that neurosis in women is likely the result of a failure to achieve orgasm (173-4). Eddy’s use of the word “physiological” rather than “psychological,” however, echoes more closely Stopes’s emphasis on refinement and understanding of biological

processes, as in her statement on women's frustration with lovers who do not bring them to orgasm: "She is probably too ignorant and unobservant of her own physiology to realise the full meaning of what is taking place, but she feels vaguely that he is to blame, and that she is being sacrificed for what, in her still greater ignorance of *his* physiology, seems to her to be his mere pleasure and self indulgence" (64, emphasis in original).

Eddy, like Stopes but unlike Caroline, views sexual technique in neutral, "physiological" terms, and therefore diagnoses her melodramatic marital difficulties as a simple case of sexual frustration, divining a practical (though impossible, given her cultural circumstances), rather than moral or romantic, solution to her difficulties.

In addition, Eddy's ruminations on Caroline's sexual frustration indicate an attitude toward male and female responsibilities in intercourse that specifically reflects Stopes's perspectives over those of more established sexologists. According to the established psychological knowledge of O'Brien's time, Caroline's obsession with her failed marriage, her refusal to have sex with Jim, and her constant nerviness and frustration would likely be the products of her failure to reconcile her own sexuality with her social mores. Despite the wealth of new information and research regarding sexuality in the early twentieth century, psychologists and sexologists seemed to focus on men's physical problems, like impotence, or women's psychological problems, like neurosis or frigidity, in describing sexual dysfunction. In 1905, Havelock Ellis published "The Sexual Impulse in Women," which challenged the idea that women are naturally "frigid," but still attributed what he called "anesthesia" in marriages to the complex nature of female sexuality: "Some of the most marked characteristics of the sexual impulse in

women...its association with modesty, its comparative late development, its seeming passivity, its need of stimulation—all combine to render difficult the final pronouncement that a woman is sexually frigid” (205). All of these characteristics describe Caroline, who was ignorant about sexual intercourse until marriage and can neither enjoy nor speak of her relations with her husband; however, O’Brien clearly depicts Caroline as the opposite of frigid, but rather as a woman with a healthy sex drive that has been thwarted by her circumstances, whose great tragedy is missing out on “the pleasures and satisfactions for which an ironic god had surely built her” (143).

Marie Stopes rejected Ellis’ complex psychological explanations in describing and lecturing to her “nearly normal” readers, suggesting instead not only that the mechanics of good (indeed, even “spiritual”) sex can be learned by most people, but also that the male in a heterosexual relationship is frequently most in need of this learning, particularly when it comes to pleasing his female partner. In *Married Love*, she puts it bluntly: “Those men—and there are many—who complain of the lack of ardour in good wives, are often themselves entirely the cause of it” (38). Such a pragmatic and feminist perspective is significant to O’Brien’s representation of the “physiological commonplace” of Caroline and Jim’s marriage.

Early in the novel, O’Brien leaves open the question of whether Caroline is suffering from repressed sexuality according to the Freudian model when she describes Caroline’s ousting of Jim from their marriage bed: “[Jim] was nervous and absurd because of a night two years ago, when his wife, without faintest warning, had cried out with a horrible cry as she lay in his arms, telling him with all the insane cruelty of despair

that she couldn't bear it, that he mustn't touch her, that he must never touch her again" (86). But Caroline's "insane cruelty" is justified by Eddy:

Eddy Considine, connoisseur of love and passion, allowed himself to wonder for the thousandth time what manner of man his brother-in-law was, who was either so unversed in woman as not to be aware how he had failed his wife or was too proud and timorous of the flesh to speak to her of such a thing or to try and set it right with a new wooing. . . . Poor Jim, who had no bridge to throw between night and day, between flesh and spirit! And poor Caroline, poor lovely Caroline who had asked so little of life, only the wedded love that others had. (173)

Several aspects of this passage correspond remarkably with Stopes's characterizations of typical marriage relationships pre-*Married Love*. Most significantly, Eddy, in his experience, realizes immediately that Jim, not Caroline, is the incapable lover, who has failed to live up to his marital responsibilities in not providing Caroline with a satisfactory sex life. The "Mr. C." passage quoted above demonstrates one of Stopes's major premises, that the majority of men, Jim apparently included, do not realize women's need for orgasmic release in their sex lives.

Eddy's reference to Jim's inability to begin a "new wooing" in his marriage gestures toward another central issue in *Married Love*: the failure of men to "woo" their wives with foreplay before initiating intercourse. Stopes insists, "The supreme law for husbands is: Remember that each act of union must be tenderly wooed and won, and that no union should ever take place unless the woman also desires it and is made physically ready for it" (54). Jim, likely because of his adherence to his social and religious

upbringing and his clear lack of imagination, does not prepare Caroline physically for intercourse, viewing sex as something to be “snatched in the night” (173), and thus horrifying rather than pleasuring his wife. In addition, it is interesting that Eddy describes the process of foreplay as “throwing a bridge between ... flesh and spirit,” hinting at the idea of “spiritual union” that Stopes repeatedly insists is the most satisfying experience of “wedded love.” Eddy feels such strong sympathy for Caroline’s frustration that he “wondered if he would ever dare to let them take her back to what she’d fled” (173). However, he does not share his apparent wisdom with Caroline or with Jim; rather, he, perhaps like O’Brien, seems to ultimately view Caroline’s misery as an inevitable “physiological commonplace” of heterosexual married life.

Eddy’s matter-of-fact view of human sexuality arises out of his urban milieu, his homosexual experiences, and the value of sexual pleasure that his lifestyle has allowed him to cultivate. Sexual pleasure as a good in itself is an idea that is central to, but sometimes also disruptive of Marie Stopes’s advice, as when her celebrations of sexual fulfillment run up against the limits she places on methods for her readers to achieve orgasm. While Stopes, unlike O’Brien, insisted on the primacy of heterosexual sex union, her advocacy for sexual pleasure implicitly suggested less “legitimate” alternative practices for readers unable to follow her contraceptive advice, or uninterested in procreative sex, practices that homosexual readers like O’Brien could make a case for legitimizing through Stopes’s own arguments. Like Eddy, O’Brien discovered in London the value of sexual pleasure, both in her relationship with Margaret Stephens (to whom *Without My Cloak* is dedicated), probably her first female lover, and in her association

with groups of gay and lesbian professional artists and writers, possibly including her ex-husband, Gustaaf Renier (Walshe 44-50). Homosexuality was a bone of contention among the sexologists and birth control advocates who were Marie Stopes's colleagues. Havelock Ellis was considered fairly extreme in his acceptance of homosexuality as a legitimate sexual identity in his ground-breaking "The Theory of Sexual Inversion," a chapter in his *Psychology of Sex* (1905). In that piece, he critiques Freud for implying that homosexuality is purely psychological, a "suggested phenomenon" (303-4), and instead likens homosexual desire to color-blindness or synesthesia, other "congenital abnormalities that imply neither disease nor immorality" (317).

Marie Stopes distanced herself from Ellis's focus on sexual variation in the preface to *Married Love* by declaring: "I do not now touch upon the many human variations and abnormalities which bulk so largely in most books on sex... In the following pages I speak to those—and in spite of all our neurotic literature and plays they are in the great majority—who are nearly normal" (10). However, I would like to suggest that O'Brien's representation of homosexuality in *Without My Cloak* shares as well as subverts aspects of Stopes's perspective on the possibilities of sexual pleasure within rigid cultural and biological restrictions. In her third book, *Enduring Passion*, published in 1928, Stopes is anxious to set boundaries on her discussion of the pleasures of sexual intimacy by specifically addressing the issue of homosexual sex. In relation to women who take female lovers when their husbands are "under-sexed," she states,

Another practical solution which some deprived women find is in Lesbian love with their own sex. The other, and quite correct name for what is now so often euphemistically

called Lesbian love is homosexual vice. It is so much practiced nowadays, particularly by the ‘independent’ type of woman, that I run a risk of being attacked because I call the thing by its correct name. One of the physical results of such unnatural reactions is the gradual accustoming of the system to reactions which are arrived at by a different process from that for which the parts were naturally formed. This tends to unfit women for real union. If a married woman does this unnatural thing she may find a growing disappointment in her husband and he may lose all natural power to play his proper part.

(37)

Even laying aside Stopes’s hint that lesbian sex will leave a woman disappointed with what her husband can offer, it is interesting that this passage dwells on homosexuality as a conscious choice made by a dissatisfied wife, a choice that (though mitigated for Stopes by the consequence of the woman becoming “unfit...for real union”) clearly contains the possibility of sexual pleasure—without the worry of pregnancy or contraception.

Like Stopes’s admonitions, O’Brien’s depictions of homosexuality imply juxtaposition between a less pleasurable (or even dangerous) heterosexual “ideal” and a sometimes fraught but potentially satisfying same-sex attraction. O’Brien represents homosexuality not as an identity-complex, like Radclyffe Hall (Fogarty 177-8), or a fascinating abnormality, like Havelock Ellis, but as a pleasurable alternative to a socially acceptable but personally dangerous or unsatisfying heterosexual sex life. O’Brien acknowledges in her novels what Stopes refuses to see: that homosexual relationships may offer an attractive and fulfilling solution to the neuroses and over-fertility birth control advocates attempted to address. Faced with repressive social mores and (often) a

lack of fertility control options, O'Brien's characters seize control over their sex lives when they can, and even in their most frustrated and subtle expressions of same-sex desire, they gain an agency the author denies to conventional heterosexual couples. We can observe an early manifestation of this in Eddy, who, as her first novel's most obviously gay character, retains a sense of freedom and self-determination that other characters can never achieve.

In an early description of Eddy, O'Brien tells us that "he never spoke of his life with exactitude" (42), and that to his sister Teresa, there was "something vague and unfamiliar about his ways. He positively ought to marry" (43). While Caroline and Anthony subject themselves to family conventions through their marriages and residences in Mellick, Eddy distinguishes himself and unsettles his family by using his perpetual bachelorhood to stay outside of their jurisdiction. The degree of control Eddy retains over his personal and sexual life mark him not only as an "outsider," but also as the character with the most agency in building his own pathway to pleasure. As Eddy ages, he thinks with regret of his failure to comply with the Considine expectations for family and children, but reminds himself, "if Anthony had this son and the bright hopes of his manhood to look out at, well, he had known ranges of dream and passion unguessed by Anthony. He had had the life he *chose*, and it had been good and deep and full" (241, emphasis mine). Unlike Anthony's regrets about Molly's death or Caroline's regrets about the ignorance with which she entered her marriage, Eddy's regrets proceed from his conscious choices and are mitigated by his awareness of the compensations he has

provided for himself, particularly in the free exercise of his “passion,” presumably with other men.

If Eddy does not have the consummated happiness of a fulfilled relationship, like O’Brien’s later lesbian heroines Clare and Lucia in *As Music and Splendor*, he does have the knowledge and experience of “dream and passion” that resonate with a spiritualized, idealistic view of sex. After Caroline leaves London, he commiserates with her would-be lover, likely also his one-time lover, Richard Froud, explaining that his incestuous love for Caroline “turned me against women.” His summary of the situation is often read as a statement of concession to social mores that privilege heterosexuality:⁴⁷ “I’ve never loved a woman except Caroline; and you love her, and I love her more perhaps than I love you, more even than I love myself. And these loves of ours are out of order and can come to no good” (198). The irony of Eddy’s reference to the “naturalness” of male-female sexual partnerships here is that the love that is truly “out of order” in this novel is Jim’s for Caroline, which cannot be expressed except through sexual practices that cause her physical and psychological pain. In conforming to his society’s strict and repressive model of sexual morality, Jim (not Eddy and not Caroline) has created the dysfunction of the Lanigan marriage, and, perhaps by extension, Eddy’s tortured sympathy for his

⁴⁷ In her 1993 book chapter “Counterpoints: A Note (or Two) on Feminism and Kate O’Brien,” Ailbhe Smyth discusses the obscuring of homosexuality in this passage: “It is so much less troublesome to erase the naming of women’s sexuality in all its diversity than to try and understand it” (29). She refers to O’Brien’s sexuality, read through Eddy’s confession.

sister.⁴⁸ Caroline's continued unhappiness as a middle-aged wife in Mellick clearly implies that it is not Eddy's or Richard's love for her (or their love for each other) that "comes to no good," but Caroline's entrapment in a poisonous marriage and repressive social milieu.

Married Love?: Denis Considine

Eddy serves not only as a contrast to Caroline and Anthony and their unsatisfactory relationships, but also as a symbol of escape and fulfillment to Anthony's son Denis, who becomes the exclusive focus of the novel in its final section. Denis is the heir presumptive to Considine and Co., but O'Brien depicts him as an artist and a dreamer, who loves his father to excess but does not fit in with the rest of the family or the life they have planned for him in Mellick. Like the unlimited reproduction sanctioned by the Catholic Church, the reproduction of the Considine's social system is a dangerous and ultimately antisocial practice that has assumed the guise of a "natural order." In the last section of the novel, this social reproduction and its consequences are highlighted, as the novel's focus shifts to Denis's romantic and career choices. O'Brien uses Denis's relationships with men and women to broaden her critique of the repressive systems

⁴⁸ Having read several commentaries, including Dalsimer's and Ryan's, that focus on Eddy's incestuous desire for Caroline at the expense of mentioning his homosexuality, I have clearly chosen the opposite course and do not focus here on the theme of incest in this scene. Two things are striking to me about O'Brien's representation of incest here, however: first, that Eddy's love for, and perhaps over-identification with, Caroline has led him away from legitimate heterosexual relationships in Mellick, and has thus been a means of releasing him from the destructive cycles his siblings are trapped in; and second, that Eddy compares his love for Caroline to his love for Richard, grouping them together as loves that are "out of order," but, subtextually, are more positive than Caroline and Jim's lawful, but miserable, marriage.

governing Irish bourgeois life, while still subtly emphasizing the special dangers of this society to women as potential mothers. In addition, O'Brien's representations of Denis as a lover continue her analytical re-creation of Marie Stopes's ideas about sex, love, and reproduction.

This *bildungsroman* within the larger novel follows Denis through a series of minor adventures, from traveling through Europe with his father to forging a friendship with a fugitive sailor whom he has to rescue from Spanish traders. However, the narrative thrust of Denis's section of *Without My Cloak* centers on three relationships that symbolize different moments in his resistance and acquiescence to his family's plans for his life. First is Denis's relationship with his cousin Tony, which O'Brien portrays as intensely emotional and satisfying, and which seems likely to represent the compromise with family expectations that would be most acceptable to Denis. Second is his illicit love affair with the illegitimate peasant girl Christina Roche, which symbolizes for Denis both the terror and the promise of rebellion against the Considine tradition. And finally, the novel ends with his sudden wooing of Anna Hennessy, an eminently eligible Mellick woman whose appeal is linked to Denis's capitulation to the life that has been planned for him. Like Stopes, O'Brien focuses specifically on the limited alternatives of middle class sexuality, and the absence of options for legitimate love in this repressive culture becomes the overriding theme as the novel draws to a close.

In *Enduring Love*, Stopes ruminates on various scourges of marriage in twentieth-century Britain:

The age-long instinct of the sweeter and sounder sort of humanity has been for a lifelong love and enduring monogamic devotion, romantic in youth, rapturous in early marriage and matured in serene old age. This ideal must survive though smirched by the nastiness of religious ascetics, of social life, eaten into by the worm in the bud, and the canker at the heart caused by ignorance of physiological truth which prudery has so long forced on youth. (25)

The Considines certainly suffer from all of these “ideal-smirching” blights on long-term romantic relations, and Denis’s fourteenth birthday, which is celebrated by a large family party in the garden Denis has designed at his father’s home, provides a forum for a display of miserable marriage relationships that casts a shadow on Denis’s development as a presumably heterosexual Considine male. Caroline appears, still mourning her lost lover, “an irrepressible voice ... crying in her. ‘Oh, Richard, Richard!’” (214). We are also introduced to Reggie Mulqueen, the favorite son of Teresa Considine, who has missed the party to visit a doctor in Dublin, but whom O’Brien describes at his mother’s home, “pacing the garden at Roseholm in a sweat of anxiety and shame. He could find no satisfactory formula in which to tell his mother what his illness was” (225). Reggie, of course, has been diagnosed with syphilis he contracted on “on holiday.” Cousin Rosie, a poorer relation who has appeared only once before in the novel, as a marriage prospect for Eddy, attends the party as well, with two of the four young children she has with the alcoholic Tom Barry. Anthony mourns this union: “This cousin of his, whom he remembered beautiful and rich and full of hope, was a seedy, fat drudge now with varicose veins. Her children had nothing and she had nothing but her love for a drunkard

of a man” (220). The introduction of Reggie’s and Rosie’s problematic lives, in particular, provides a connection to birth-control era thinking about men’s carelessness in their sex lives and their ability to spread “working class diseases” like venereal disease and dipsomania into middle-class homes. In the first chapter of *Married Love*, Stopes attempts to distinguish the experiences of her middle-class readers from these common sexual problems: “In the last few years there has been such an awakening to the realisation of the corrosive horror of all aspects of prostitution that there is no need to labour the point that no marriage can be happy where the husband has, in buying another body, sold his own health with his honour, and is tainted with disease. Nor is it necessary, in speaking to well-meaning, optimistic young couples, to enlarge upon the obvious dangers of drunkenness, self-indulgence, and the cruder forms of selfishness” (24). Her mention of such problems in her address to “nearly normal” young couples, however, indicates their prevalence among all social classes, a prevalence that O’Brien’s text makes explicit in order to emphasize, at the moment of its protagonist’s sexual maturity, the broad corruption of traditional heterosexual relationships. Between infidelity, disease, poverty, and intemperance, the married guests at Denis’s birthday provide a discouraging precedent for Denis’s future life among the Considines.

Unsurprisingly, O’Brien contrasts these failed heterosexual romances with a rosier picture of homosocial behavior at Denis’s party. Tony Lanigan, Denis’s best friend, is Caroline’s son, described as “the masculine version of his mother [...] Caroline renewed and set free” (211). At least part of Tony’s freedom in comparison to his mother lies in his ability to set himself outside the family social code by developing deep

friendships with men, including Denis. Upon Tony's arrival at the party, Denis "seized plates of strawberries and rushed Tony away from all his relatives to sit on a distant bank in the sun" (211); the two compliment each other and demand each other's exclusive attention throughout the day. They end their evening "arms linked, shining in young beauty," watching the stars rise and singing hymns with Denis's schoolmates (226). Oppressive tradition intrudes, however, when Denis and Tony's behavior toward each other becomes the catalyst for Denis's teacher Martin Devoy's realization of his own love for Denis, a realization that disturbs him enough to cause him to leave Mellick. Martin chastises himself, "That notion that you've bluffed yourself with that you were somehow necessary and helpful to him—what was that, admit it, but an inversion of the truth, that he was helpful and necessary to you?...Why, you're jealous of Tony Lanigan—you know you are—jealous, jealous!" (219). Martin leaves the party, and Mellick, renewed in his purpose to do religious work in an attempt to "empty his heart of all these earthly things" (226), depriving Denis not only of a favorite teacher but also of a model of unmarried life and non-heterosexual desire that could provide a contrast to that of his extended family.

As Denis enters adulthood, however, he loses the relationship whose intensity drove Martin Devoy away, as Tony Lanigan decides to join a Cistercian monastery. Tony's confession of his plans to Denis, on a rainy day when they take refuge in a peasant cottage in the Mellick woods, reveals to Denis his cousin's fear of the "mischief" of sexuality as well as his own strong feelings for Tony:

'No one can stop me. I'd do anything I could for father—but this—this I must do, Denis.'

‘I can’t see why!’

‘If you were in me you’d see. I want to get out of mischief. I want to do hard work, chop down trees and dig potatoes and—and pray. I—I thought you’d understand a bit better.’

Denis stood up and walked about the kitchen. He thought that to move might ease the sick, hollow feeling that he had.

‘In a way, I do. But it isn’t you who should go, Tony. . . . It’s people like me, Tony—people like me who should run away and hide on the tops of mountains! Oh, Tony, don’t go! What mischief could you do, you silly ass?’ (253)

Their discussion illustrates both the intensity of their feelings for each other and O’Brien’s positing of the availability of same-sex relationships as an alternative to the impossibilities of heterosexual relationships. Tony’s association of hard work, self-control, and a sense of purpose with the homosocial environment at the monastery align well with O’Brien’s depiction of Eddy’s self-determination in an environment outside the heterosexual imperatives of Mellick and Considine tradition. The contrast between his firm decision and Denis’s anxious reaction to it highlights O’Brien’s celebration of her gay characters’ ability to rebel against family expectations and social and sexual norms. . . . Denis’s inability to separate himself from those norms—particularly as Tony’s iconoclastic decision directly precipitates his own conventional choice to give in to his father’s demand that he get a job at Considine & Co.—reveals his entrapment in the “nastiness of social life” represented by his family history.

Though physically absent, Tony appears again in the novel, as Denis begins his first sexual relationship with a woman, Christina Roche, an illegitimate farm worker whose most notable feature for Denis seems to be her “buccaneer’s teeth” (288). After Denis and Christina consummate their relationship, she becomes confused in Denis’s mind with Tony: “Her face shone like a flash, as a saint’s might in a vision, against his dropped eyelids. It was pale as ivory—no, it was ruddy now, and laughing—it was Tony’s face” (312). The characters of Tony and Christina have a connection in that they both represent alternatives to Denis’s programmed life among the Considines, alternatives defined in terms of (potential or actual) sexual relationships with Denis. While Christina would not represent a break from heterosexual tradition for Denis, her class status makes her an inappropriate match for a Considine; this, and her rebellious departure from her Catholic background in having sex with Denis, “newly aware with a shock that made her smile that it was possible to commit what priests call mortal sin without the faintest sense of guilt” (308), mark her in O’Brien’s terms as potentially fulfilling companion for Denis’s escape from Mellick tradition.

O’Brien’s depiction of Denis and Christina’s sexual relationship marks it as completely opposite to Caroline’s with Jim; rather than using the scientific language of sexual dysfunction to describe their union, she uses flowery, metaphor-laden imagery reminiscent of Stopes’s descriptions of ideal physical love. Stopes tells us in *Married Love*,

When two who are mated in every respect burn with the fire of the innumerable forces within them, which set their bodies longing towards each other with the desire to

inter-penetrate and to encompass one another, the fusion of joy and rapture is not purely physical. The half swooning sense of flux which overtakes into its flaming tides the whole essence of the man and woman, and as it were, the heat of the contact vapourises their consciousness so that it fills the whole of cosmic space. For the moment they are identified with the divine thoughts, the waves of eternal force, which to the Mystic often appear in terms of golden light. (78)

O'Brien matches the intensity and overwrought language of this passage in describing Denis's loss of his virginity to Christina. When they first see each other, after eight days apart, "Her eyes flickered over him hungrily and a flame of delight rose in them for this refreshment after abstinence. He did not touch her, although the movements of his heart were shaking him so that to stand before her without swaying was not easy." As he approaches her, still swooning, "There seemed a storm about him; some sea was roaring in his ears. . . . He was caught up, enmisted and illuminated, in the country of his own desire" (307). This greeting culminates in the consummation of their relationship: "...their hands and mouths clung in immediate, undeniable demand. Wading through pools of fern they went as [Irish love god] Angus may have led them, to a still greener, quieter place where, canopied by long, satiny leaves of chestnut, their bed of wood sorrel was laid" (308).

Also evincing the influence of Stopes's ideas on her depiction of Denis's romantic relationships, O'Brien implies that although Christina and Denis are led to each other out of instinct, it is their love-making technique that makes the experience so enjoyable. She suggests that Angus is "hovering instructively" around the couple as they

come to each other (308), and the consummation of their affair is represented in terms of instruction: "So the two innocents learnt and taught the art of love" (309). Part of their practice of the "art of love" is apparently mutual orgasm: Christina and Denis "reached its [love's] last secret and cried out and sobbed in startled revelation" (309). Both of these ideas—that instruction in technique is an important part of a sex relationship and that mutual orgasm is the highest goal of intercourse—reflect Stopes's ideals in *Married Love*. Stopes's language highlights the spiritual importance of developing sexual technique: "Only by a reverent study of the Art of Love can the beauty of its expression be realized in linked lives" (26). In addition, "...the act gives the most intense physical pleasure and benefit which the body can experience, and it is a *mutual*, not a selfish, pleasure and profit, more calculated than anything else to draw out an unspeakable tenderness and understanding in both partakers of this sacrament" (58, emphasis in original). The numerous connections between Stopes's language and O'Brien's descriptions of the consummation of Denis and Christina's relationship set that relationship apart as both spiritually and physically satisfying, transcending the limited mutual understanding that characterized the heterosexual relations between Molly and Anthony and Caroline and Jim.

It is significant that the passages above emphasize Denis's lack of control over his emotions and actions in regard to Christina, a lack that is also highlighted by the intrusions of Catholic doctrines on sex that place Denis and Christina outside their society's norms: "Each saw, however dimly, that religion and society waited behind this forbidden joy for a grave reckoning" (310). Unlike Eddy, Denis cannot maintain agency

over his sexual ties, both because he chooses to pursue heterosexual relationships (i.e. sex relations that can result in pregnancy and thus “scandal”) and because his choice of a conventional career path ties him to Mellick and its conservative social code. I would argue that O’Brien’s purpose in representing Denis’s relationship with Christina in such spiritualized and religiously-loaded terms is to demonstrate that relationship’s promise as an escape for Denis from his family’s expectations and the misery of their romantic lives, but also ultimately to mitigate that promise through reminding us of the “rules” governing male-female sexuality—rules that are in place because of the uncontrolled forces of human reproduction in traditional societies.

Christina does not become pregnant through her relationship with Denis. At this point in the novel, O’Brien seems concerned less with the exigencies of actual pregnancy—having dealt with that aspect of her topic in Molly’s narrative—and concerned more with demonstrating how the anxiety surrounding uncontrolled reproduction seeps into all aspects of romantic and family life. Contrary to O’Brien’s audience’s expectations, perhaps, the Considine’s fear of Christina’s pregnancy inspires them to act on her behalf rather than reject her. Denis’s uncle Tom Considine happens upon the couple kissing, and ships Christina off to America without Denis’s knowledge, to save his nephew from temptation, but he and the family have a change of heart when they find that the temptation has already won out: “The Considine moral sense was limited by the conventions of the period, but it was honest. That a girl might be in trouble and maybe in danger of death at the other end of the world through the fault of one of them, and because of their notion of themselves, was a risk their consciences could not

accommodate” (374). Denis follows Christina to New York and spends several months searching for her there before discovering her working at a restaurant. Christina’s response to his insistence that she return to Ireland and marry him is also unexpected. As Denis proclaims his love, O’Brien presents Christina’s thoughts: “...she had discerned what Denis had half hidden from himself and of which this glad and tender hour he was determinedly incredulous, that he loved now but no longer imperiously desired her. ... [P]assion was there, Christina thought, as an accident—not because this was Christina whom he kissed at last, but because she was beautiful and had been long alone and unconsolated”(410). Christina’s refusal to accept anything but desire for her exclusively—her refusal to accept marriage in the absence of spiritualized, eternal sexual passion—marks her as a true practitioner of the Art of Love. She does not bow to the social imperative that sex be equated with marriage and family, and thus avoids falling into the repression and hopelessness that have claimed Caroline Lanigan. Not pregnant with Denis’s child, Christina chooses to make a life for herself as an emigrant, challenging traditional Mellick society by rejecting elevation to middle-class status and legitimacy. Denis, however, returns to Mellick, missing another opportunity to separate himself from his family’s expectations.

The end of Christina and Denis’s relationship pushes back the final crisis of the novel to Denis’s twenty-first birthday, when he is supposed to come into his inheritance and position at the family firm. However, at his promotion ceremony at Considine and Co., Denis has a hysterical fit and runs out of the building, going to the next town to get drunk. The narrative appears to be over, with Denis breaking out on his own: “I’m not

sane yet, I suppose, but I'm free anyway and that's a start. I'm free of them all.'" (460). However, here O'Brien has what Walshe has characterized as "a failure of nerve," or at least a failure to allow her characters to break away from bourgeois privilege and convention (53). Inebriated and embarrassed, Denis returns to River Hill for his birthday party, ostensibly to apologize to Anthony. However, upon seeing the beautiful "blue-stocking" Anna Hennessey wandering in his family garden, contemplating her possible engagement to his cousin Victor Considine, Denis falls immediately in love with her, and after a brief conversation leads her back into the house to assume his destined place in the family and community: "He snatched her hand and hurried her down the long avenue of roses. It seemed imperative to get back at once under the roof of River Hill" (467).

Anna Hennessey is one of the most minor characters in the novel, with only nine pages of "stage time"; however, by the time she appears, her identity has been firmly established by her family's role as the other "leading family" of Mellick, into which the Considines have been eager to ingratiate themselves. When Anna is first mentioned, in the course of family gossip about Victor, Anthony tells Denis, "I don't know what we'll do with your Aunt Sophia if her family lands another Hennessey!" (439). Moreover, Anna is her grandfather John Aloysius Hennessey's favorite grandchild, who has inherited from him a strong belief "in the duty of the individual to submit himself to the rule of his tradition" (458). A conversation between Anthony and John Aloysius, which takes place just before Denis and Anna meet, hints at the centrality of reproduction to the "rule of tradition" O'Brien is depicting. Anthony has withdrawn to his room in shame over Denis's behavior, but John Aloysius seeks him out to give him parenting advice, and

ends by declaring his preference for Denis over Victor Considine: “Since it looks as if your nephew, Victor Considine, may soon be related to me, I don’t mind telling you that I wish he were more like your mad son Denis. ...[Denis] looks like a thoroughbred. As you know, I account such things important” (454-5). In this bald comparison of Denis to a “thoroughbred,” John Aloysius lays bare the ultimate goal of all of the marriage conventions that have complicated the plot of *Without My Cloak*: to breed a race of socially and genetically “fit” citizens to propagate the Irish middle class. Denis’s attraction to Anna, and Anna’s to Denis, is thus established not as an impulse toward self-fulfillment or an idealized spiritual connection, but toward a reproductive imperative. The plot of *Without My Cloak* has come full circle—Denis and Anna’s sexual choices will be circumscribed by the same impossibilities and frustrations that plagued Anthony, Molly, and Caroline.

Denis’s wooing of Anna is presented as a compromise with his father: “‘Would this do?’ he heard himself asking Anthony, half in despair, half in hope. ‘Could we settle it this way, father?’” (466). As Walshe and others have noted, however, the compromise is surely all on Denis’s side. Expanding on the idea of O’Brien’s “failure of nerve,” Dalsimer argues, “The Considines, however, have yet to meet their demise or even their decline, for despite their flaws, their inadequacies, their blind spots, Kate O’Brien is not yet willing or able to relinquish them. Although she may condemn loveless marriages, and the dooming of women to too many pregnancies, to death, to emigration, she stands by her characters, and their way of life prevails” (71). But for whom does this way of life prevail? Dalsimer’s list of the obstacles faced by the Considines in the course of the

novel is accurate, but while for her the significance of those obstacles is mitigated by Denis's ultimate decision to pursue a traditional romantic course in Mellick, I believe that it is Denis's choice that is undermined by the patterns O'Brien has revealed in the Considine relationships. Rather than crafting a new life for himself, like Eddy or Tony, Denis will attempt to make do with the "social and religious codes" that destroyed his parents' generation. These codes may prevail as abstract entities, but the individual Considines will not prevail in any meaningful emotional or physical way. The apparent wealth of satisfactory life choices available to Denis because of his family fortune and firm status within the Irish upper-middle class are mitigated by his entrapment within the class-bound Catholicism and social anxieties that define his experiences. Thus, instead of identifying with her characters, as Dalsimer and Walshe claim she does, O'Brien seems to sympathize with them, while harshly condemning their social circumstances and their limited options using the language of her own contemporaries in the sexology and birth control fields

O'Brien's general critique of the Considines is a common one in family sagas: wealth and beauty cannot bring happiness within corrupt communities. But the specificity of the issues O'Brien presents, including maternal death, sexual frigidity and dissatisfaction, sexually transmitted infections, and failed heteronormativity, indicate her particular investment in a worldview influenced by the theories of sexologists active in the early twentieth century, and particularly by Marie Stopes's portrayals of male-female sexuality and its discontents. Molly, Caroline, Eddy, and Denis are products not only of their Irish-Catholic milieu, but also of the public knowledge of birth control as an

ideology that pervaded O'Brien's London during the composition of *Without My Cloak*. While O'Brien's dissatisfaction with the heterosexual mandate governing romantic relationships in Catholic Ireland arose in part out of her personal frustration and participation in that era of Irish history, Stopes work provided her a paradigm within which to craft a different romantic ideal, one in which reproduction was secondary to sexual fulfillment and "marital duty" less important than personal health. Thus, without ever directly referencing birth control or contraception in *Without My Cloak*, O'Brien creates a persuasive argument in favor of fertility regulation and the pleasure- and health-based models of sexuality popularized by birth control advocates. An understanding of the rhetoric that inspired her, with all its flexibilities and limitations, offers scholars another window into the complexities not only of O'Brien's depictions of sexuality, but also of those of a number of British and American authors whose careers were punctuated by the release of the sensationalized and revolutionary best-selling birth control manuals.

Chapter Five

Doctors, Veterans, and Prostitutes: Fertility Control in Virginia Woolf's Feminist Narratives

In his autobiography *Beginning Again*, Leonard Woolf describes his efforts to make the “right” decision about his and Virginia’s reproductive lives at the time of their marriage in 1912:

In the next few months, I became more and more uneasy about one thing. We both wanted to have children, but the more I saw the dangerous effect of any strain or stress upon her, the more I began to doubt whether she would be able to stand the strain and stress of childbearing. I went and consulted Sir George Savage; he brushed my doubts aside. But now my doubts about Sir George Savage were added to my doubts about Virginia’s health. ... So I went off and consulted two other well known doctors, Maurice Craig and T.B. Hysop, and also the lady who ran the mental nursing home where Virginia had several times stayed. They confirmed my fears and were strongly against her having children. We followed their advice. (82)

The decision to avoid childbirth appears to have been mainly Leonard’s (see Lee 329). Although Woolf’s biographer Hermione Lee also records Virginia’s concerns over the effect children would have had on her writing, and on her active intellectual life, given her tenuous mental health (328, 331), she emphasizes the lasting pain caused by the decision. Most tellingly, Lee cites a letter Woolf wrote to Ethel Sands in which she

stated, “I’m always angry with myself for not having forced Leonard to take the risk in spite of the doctors” (537).

Biographical writing about Virginia Woolf’s relationship to the idea of motherhood has centered mainly on her relationship with her sister Vanessa Bell. On the one hand, Virginia has been represented by herself and others as an anti-domestic foil to Vanessa. In 1927, when Vanessa’s children were teenagers, she wrote, “I don’t like the physicalness of having children of one’s own” (Lee 536). On the other hand, however, Lee records that Virginia felt a lifelong jealousy of Vanessa’s motherhood, and that she was painfully aware of her feelings: in her fifties, “she continued to feel threatened by Vanessa’s maternal superiority, and if other people observed this ‘family complex’ she was defensive” (536). While Vanessa wrote to Virginia on the subject of children in 1913, “One can never really settle these matters beforehand” (Lee 330), Leonard and Virginia did settle on childlessness early in their marriage, and she seems to have experienced feelings of regret and relief that were tied to that conscious decision.

Despite her (probably complex and shifting) feelings about her childlessness, fertility control was a fact not only of Woolf’s physical/sexual life, but of her mental landscape. I am particularly interested in Leonard’s statement, “We followed their advice,” which implies that the couple employed contraception at least at some points in their marriage, and that for them, sexual relations (or a lack thereof) included preventing conception. Woolf’s identity as a woman working (perhaps unwillingly) to prevent pregnancy and to understand the implications of reproduction and fertility control on her legacy, her marriage, and her social status, is essential to an understanding of her fiction

and non-fiction. I will look at contraceptive use as a part of Virginia Woolf's writing self, and at the appearance of birth control and birth control politics in her works as a manifestation of her knowledge and experience not only of the works of sexologists and birth control advocates but also of the ongoing reproductive and sexual decision-making of her marriage. I argue that her experience as a woman physically able to control her fertility, but limited in her choices by male authority (that of her husband Leonard but also and especially that of her doctors) allowed Woolf's public and private narratives—narratives related to feminism and eugenics, and narratives of desire for motherhood and frustration with her mental health⁴⁹—to intersect one another. Analyzing appearances of the politics of birth control, including references to birth rates and the British race, to abortion, and to women's limited options for sexual expression, in two of Woolf's works: *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *Three Guineas* (1938), I hope to show that Woolf had a sustained interest in the politics of contraception, which appears both in her fictional self-representation and in her feminist advocacy.

Contraception and Reproduction in Virginia Woolf: A Critical Overview

Christina Hauck's ground-breaking 1995 article "'To Escape the Horror of Family Life': Virginia Woolf and the British Birth Control Debate" examines Woolf's textual and personal investments in birth control, including the class-based assumptions upon which many pro-contraception arguments rested. Hauck provides an important overview of Woolf's engagement with the politics of birth control and provides several starting

⁴⁹ I realize I am drawing a tenuous distinction in designating feminism and eugenics "public narratives" for Woolf, as these matters of public discussion were intimately bound to her own life experience.

points for the analysis I will undertake in this chapter. First of all, she cites Susan Gubar's argument (in the 1981 collection *Representations of Women in Fiction*) that the name of "Mary Carmichael," the modern women writer Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, is a reference to Marie Stopes, who published fiction under the pseudonym Mary Carmichael, saying that "Birth control emerges in *A Room of One's Own* as a cause of the greater professional and artistic freedom experienced by women in the early twentieth century" (Hauck 20). Hauck also breaks important ground in acknowledging Woolf's dual view of birth control, her ability to see it as both as a tool able to provide women with greater personal freedom and as a discourse potentially able to limit their sexual autonomy and discourage them from pursuing non-heterosexual paradigms of sexual fulfillment (15, 32). However, Hauck inadequately accounts for Woolf's engagement with the multiplicity of discourses surrounding birth control, including those of pacifism, eugenics, and feminism, particularly in her politically-based fiction and non-fiction; I will apply Hauck's claims and my own research to points in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Three Guineas* when Woolf engages with discourses and figures that represent intersections of "the personal and the political" through contraception and birth control ideology.

Hauck's article begins with an epigraph taken from a 1930 diary entry in which Woolf describes her belief in birth control for the lower classes: "Eight in a room. One bed. What can you expect. ... What would we do if we lived like that? But we're not beasts. We can control ourselves" (*Diary* v. 3, 283-4, quoted in Hauck 15). Woolf implies here that the miners' families she describes mate and breed indiscriminately, as "you expect" with large numbers of people sharing a single bed, and contrasts that situation

with the “controlled” sexuality and reproductive output of the middle classes.⁵⁰ Unlike Kate O’Brien and Nella Larsen, Woolf (like Charlotte Perkins Gilman) belonged to a class and ethnicity that was generally seen by eugenicists and birth control advocates as not reproducing *enough* to benefit the English/Anglo-American race. In the intersections among Woolf’s desire for motherhood, her seeming disgust at the overt sexuality of the poor, and the pressure on her and women like her to reproduce for the “good of the race,” we see enacted Hauck’s claim that “as a discourse, birth control ‘produces’ female sexuality only to recontain it in service of procreation and male heterosexual desire” (17).

Woolf was a proponent as well as an object of such discourses, however, and recent critics have pointed out her references to essentialist ideas about race and her references to eugenic ideas in her public and private writing. In the 2007 article “History’s Child: Virginia Woolf, Heredity, and Historical Consciousness,” Mia Carter provides an overview of references to heredity and genetics over Woolf’s career, arguing, “Woolf’s corpus reveals the writer’s gradual process of redefining heritage” (72). Carter claims that Sir Francis Galton’s *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (1870), which includes a brief analysis of the Stephen family, was a foundational text for Woolf. She argues that although “the teenage and young adult Woolf is very comfortable making pronouncements about race class or tribe” (72) based on received ideas about her family heritage and its basis in genetic determination,

⁵⁰ The suggestion of incest in Woolf’s description of the mining families all sharing one bed resonates oddly with her own sexual abuse by her half-brother Gerald Duckworth, an example that undermines her implication that such behavior is only “expected” among lower-class families.

Woolf's "skepticism about history" enabled her to confront her family heritage in critical ways and reject traditional notions of heredity and memory in her literary work. Donald Childs, on the other hand, reads Woolf as a lifelong advocate of negative and positive eugenics, noting a 1915 diary entry in which she comments after seeing a group of institutionalized people, "It was perfectly horrible. They should certainly be killed" (*Diary* Vol. 1, 13) and adducing her advocacy of more births among the middle- and upper-classes in *Three Guineas*. In outlining Woolf's interest in eugenics and the above diary quotation in particular, Lee has pointed out that such pronouncements by Woolf must be understood in the context of her own mental illness and repeated (and ultimately successful) suicide attempts. Not only would Woolf have felt ambivalence about mental patients based on her own ongoing problems, but she also felt a strong desire to distance herself from her half-sister Laura Stephen, who was institutionalized from the time Woolf was a young girl (Lee 102-3). Lee notes that when George Duckworth (Woolf's avaricious, sexually predatory half-brother) died, Woolf wrote to Vanessa, "Leonard says Laura is the one we could have spared," (103), highlighting the prejudice against mental illness with which Woolf was surrounded, a prejudice she must have internalized to a painful degree.

In addition to participating in a line of scholarship focusing on Woolf's interventions in discourses of eugenics and fertility, I also rely on scholars who have used the tools of queer theory to bring to the surface alternative narratives of sexuality in Woolf's texts. Because I am analyzing previously invisible or underexamined depictions of female sexuality expressed through reproductive anxiety or desire, I have found

particularly helpful critics who describe Woolf's revisions of dominant modes of eroticism and the ways those revisions evade even critical readers. For example, in a 1997 article entitled "A Lesbian Reading Virginia Woolf," Toni A.H. McNaron declares, "When the crucial scene [Clarissa and Sally's kiss] finally pierced my consciousness, I spent a long time figuring out why and how I'd missed it during my several previous readings. ... I understood that I had been so thoroughly and successfully trained (brainwashed?) to read for heterosexual romance that nothing else registered as excitement or eroticism" (12). Stephen Barber goes further in his 1997 article, "Lip-Reading: Woolf's Secret Encounters," arguing that Woolf encodes challenges to heteronormative identity formations in her representations of relationships between gay men and straight women: "queer combinations radically disturb enframing and unfolding, and fissure the plot to provide vital lines of flight" (435). Barber's and McNaron's perspectives, among others, highlight her unmooring from traditional modes of representing eroticism and her interest in covert and "risky" facets of human sexuality. I do not apply these critics' work on Woolf's queer identities and experiences to her heterosexual relationship and experiences with fertility in order to combat designations of Woolf as a lesbian or deny her sexual experiences with Vita Sackville-West or other female lovers—rather, I find readings that emphasize Woolf's encoding of lesbian themes and her sexual encounters with women helpful parallels to her treatment of contraception, another taboo topic in public discourse and literary scholarship. I hope to show how Woolf's representations of sexuality deviate from traditional narratives of desire not only in their emphasis on same-sex relationships, but also in their complicating

straightforward readings of women's desire for men by acknowledging that desire's imbrication with the anxiety to avoid or achieve conception.

“Hard Green Apples”: Marie Stopes in Mrs. Dalloway's London

Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf's fourth novel, has become an important object of inquiry for queer theory critics because of its idealized depictions of Clarissa Dalloway's "crush" on Sally Seton, its vilification of the lesbian tutor Miss Kilman, and its dramatization of the suicide of Septimus Smith, precipitated in part by his guilt over the WWI death of his fellow soldier and possible lover Bates. Most agree that Smith and his experiences with post-traumatic stress syndrome and the medical establishment form the clearest point of biographical identification for Woolf in this novel; as Alex Zwerdling states, "[S]he calls upon the memories of her own mental breakdowns and treatment to describe Septimus Smith's case. And her personal experience and involvement give her the authority to question the accepted wisdom on the subject" (31). The "accepted wisdom," of course, is typified by the "obscurely evil" Sir William Bradshaw (*Mrs. Dalloway* 184), the doctor Septimus and his wife Rezia consult about his mental illness. Lee has associated Bradshaw with Woolf's experience consulting doctors about whether her mental health would suffer if she bore children (331). However, Woolf not only weaves her own experiences as a potentially fertile mental patient into this narrative, but also takes up the complex issues of medical power, personal choice, and eugenic family planning in her representations of Septimus, Rezia, and Sir William, as well as of the Dalloway family. Ultimately, in the contrasts she evokes between these characters, the adult Sally Seton with her "five enormous boys," and Clarissa herself, Woolf subtly posits individual

control over fertility as a more thoughtful and ultimately productive response to the changing modern world than either Septimus's choice of suicide or Clarissa's peers' adherence to the banal reproduction of the conventional English family.

It is Peter Walsh, Clarissa's former admirer and Imperial employee in India, whose musings on the differences in London in the five years he has been away reveal the book's situatedness in a post-birth control era. Walking in the London streets after his unsuccessful visit to Clarissa, he observes:

Those five years—1918 to 1923—had been, he suspected, somehow very important. People looked different. Newspapers seemed different. Now for instance there was a man writing quite openly in one of the respectable weeklies about water closets. That you couldn't have done ten years ago.... On board ship coming home there were lots of young men and girls—Betty and Bertie he remembered in particular—carrying on quite openly; the old mother sitting and watching them with her knitting, cool as a cucumber. The girl would stand still and powder her nose in front of everyone. And they weren't engaged; just having a good time; no feelings hurt on either side. As hard as nails she was—Betty What'shername—; but a thorough good sort. She would make a good wife at thirty. (71-2)

Though the year from which he reckons the changes in London, 1918, is the year of the Armistice, Peter does not acknowledge that correspondence, and seems to prevent a direct reference to WWI in his sense that the intervening years are “somehow” important. The changes he dwells on are personal and social, despite the economic, structural, and

political evolution England saw following the Great War. More specifically, Peter's focus on the shift in sexual mores since 1918 may serve to remind readers of another important event of that year, the publication of Marie Stopes's *Married Love*. A 1923 letter from Woolf to Molly MacCarthy echoes Peter's surprise at shifting sexual mores, and connects that shift directly to Stopes's work:

I've been talking to the younger generation all afternoon. They are like crude hard green apples: no halo, mildew, or blight. Seduced at 15, life has no holes or corners for them. I admire, but deplore. Such an old maid, they make me feel. 'And how do you manage not- not- not to have children?' I ask. 'Oh, we read Mary Stopes of course!' Figure to yourself my dear Molly—before taking their virginity, the young men of our time produce marked copies of Stopes! (*Letters*, vol. 3, 6)

Echoing her ambivalence in that letter, Woolf seems to have Peter also “admire, but deplore” “Betty What'shername” and her shipboard lover; his description of her as “hard as nails” echoes Woolf's sense that her young friends “are like crude hard green apples.” In both cases, Woolf presents the difference between generations as a move toward a more casual approach to sex and romance—one that is facilitated by a broader knowledge of contraceptive techniques.

In addition to Peter's connection of the year 1918 with a change in sexual mores, other clues in *Mrs. Dalloway* point to Woolf's acknowledgement of Stopes's effect on London society in the 1920's. The first such clue dates from a previous version of the first chapter of the novel, the short story “Mrs. Dalloway on Bond Street,” which

appeared in T.S. Eliot's *Criterion* in 1922; in that story, Briggs argues, Woolf mimics James Joyce's attention to bodily functions in *Ulysses*, by having Clarissa wonder if the shopgirl she buys gloves from is menstruating, and silently acknowledge that Hugh Whitbread's wife Evelyn is going through menopause (Briggs 139; Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway's Party* 11). *Mrs. Dalloway* retains a more subtle hint about why Evelyn Whitbread is "out of sorts": when Clarissa encounters Hugh on Bond Street, he tells her "his wife had some internal ailment, nothing serious, which as an old friend, Clarissa Dalloway would quite understand without requiring him to specify" (6). What, exactly, Hugh is not specifying becomes obvious a few pages later, when Clarissa remembers the "usual interminable talk of women's ailments" that awaits her upon a visit to Evelyn in the nursing home (10). Interestingly, the image Clarissa encounters directly after her meeting with Hugh is also related to reproduction: "June had drawn out every leaf on the trees. The mothers of Pimlico gave suck to their young" (7). By juxtaposing Evelyn, brought from the Whitbread country home into London to "see the doctors" concerning her reproductive cycle with the poor mothers of London, depicted as animals breeding "young" according to the seasons, Woolf contrasts the reproductive experiences of the educated upper classes with that of poor Londoners, following the pattern of Stopes and other birth control advocates in identifying the former with neurosis and the latter with over-fertility.⁵¹

⁵¹ Stopes, as we saw in the previous chapter, associates middle-class neurosis with women's lack of sexual fulfillment: "The modern civilised neurotic woman has become a by-word in the Western world. Why? I am certain that much of this suffering is caused by the ignorance of both men and women regarding not only the inner physiology, but even

Besides reflecting Stopes's contrast between upper- and lower-class women, *Mrs. Dalloway*, like Kate O'Brien's *Without My Cloak*, evokes the unequal comparison Stopes unintentionally evoked between homosexual and heterosexual pleasure. Just as O'Brien uses Caroline and Eddy to juxtapose inept and unsatisfying heterosexual sex with the potential fulfillment of a homosexual relationship, Woolf uses Clarissa's memories of her passion for Sally Seton and her experiences of order and coolness in her relationship with Richard Dalloway to make a similar point. In describing Clarissa's sexual attraction to women, Woolf closely echoes the overwrought, imagistic rhetoric of Stopes's depictions of sex. Not only does Clarissa describe her kiss with Sally as "the revelation, the religious feeling!" (36), but she sees her desire for women in general in similarly spiritualized terms:

It was as sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores. (32)

the obvious outward expression, of the complete sex-act" (*Married Love* 68). Woolf certainly opens the possibility of reading Hugh Whitbread as a selfish and inept lover; Eileen Barrett has suggested as much in this argument in her 1997 article, "Unmasking Lesbian Passion: The Inverted World of *Mrs. Dalloway*." "While Hugh Whitbread maintains a 'manly,' 'perfectly upholstered body,' Evelyn suffers from 'some internal ailment' that suggests the toll marriage takes on the female body" (152).

Compare this description of a sexual orgasm so spiritualized that, like Christ, it seems to cure leprosy with Stopes's description of "married love": "The half swooning sense of flux which overtakes the spirit in that eternal moment at the apex of rapture sweeps into its flaming tides the whole essence of the man and the woman, and as it were, the heat of the contact vapourises their consciousness so that it fills the whole of cosmic space" (78). The heat, overwhelming "rapture," and spiritual climax of these descriptions of arousal are contrasted in *Mrs. Dalloway* with Clarissa's feelings about her own "married love," which she associates with "the bed and Baron Marbot and the candle half-burnt. ... Richard, who slipped upstairs in his socks and then, as often as not, dropped his water bottle and swore!" (32). Following Clarissa's doctor's advice after her flu, as well as Stopes's advice for married couples, Clarissa and Richard do not share a bedroom; however, rather than increasing their passion for each other, as Stopes suggests separate bedrooms will do (*Married Love* 72), their separation reinforces the de-sexualization of the conservative British household.

Like O'Brien, Woolf uses spiritualized sexological discourse to point out the differences between where her readers expect to find romantic passion and where such passion exists in real lives, with particular emphasis on the non-reproductive, but still emotionally and physically "fruitful" possibilities of same sex attraction. I do not wish to make a sweeping claim about Woolf's view of marital sexuality here, however. As Alex Zwerdling has noted, we cannot see Clarissa's and Richard's marriage in terms of a dichotomy between romantic passion and romantic disappointment: "her marriage to Richard is not really a betrayal of self so much as a compact between two people to live

together yet allow the soul a little breathing space” (140). Richard, while he does not inspire in Clarissa the passion Sally did, does offer a controlled, dignified relationship characterized by mutual restraint and respect, which distances the couple sharply from the over-reproductive, nature-identified “mothers of Pimlico.” When Richard comes to visit her after his lunch with Lady Bruton, Clarissa thinks, “there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect...for one would not part with it oneself, or take it, against his will, from one’s husband, without losing one’s independence, one’s self-respect—something, after all, priceless” (120). Scholars have frequently ascribed the “gulf” between Clarissa and Richard to their sex life.⁵² A more interesting question than that of whether Richard and Clarissa have sex, however, has to do with the ways that Woolf uses their relationship and Clarissa’s relationship with Sally to complicate an “either-or” view of marital sexuality, suggesting that Clarissa can feel a passionate, erotically spiritual desire for Sally, a nostalgic attraction to Peter, and a comfortable, unerotic but not necessarily unhappy or even totally de-sexualized relationship with her husband. I will return to the idea of Clarissa’s flexible approach to love and sexuality at the end of my discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Septimus Smith and Woolf’s Eugenic Anxiety

While references to women’s reproduction and sexual arousal in Woolf reflect public discourse about sexuality and birth control circulating during the composition of *Mrs. Dalloway*, references to racial reproduction and its control also appear in the novel;

⁵² Lois Cucullu argues that the Dalloways’ separate bedrooms represent the downfall of “[Clarissa’s] authority over affective relations” (76), implying that the de-eroticization of their relationship associates Clarissa with sterility and death (76-77).

such references are particularly connected to Sir William Bradshaw and his power over Septimus Smith and his larger clientele of mentally ill patients. Describing Sir William after his visit with Septimus and Rezia, which Rezia sees as a failure, Woolf announces, "...Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion" (99). In "forbidding childbirth," Sir William enacts the "doctors only" ideal of birth control distribution that both Stopes and Sanger supported; this description of his activities also connects him to Woolf's own experience with doctors, who may have "forced upon her" the choice to remain childless (Lee 331). The above passage contains further evidence of Woolf's connection between Sir William and the eugenicist arm of the birth control movement. His "secluding lunatics" reflects the heightened anxiety in America and Europe over the sexual and reproductive activities of mentally ill individuals. Woolf connects Sir William specifically with such institutions as she expands on his connection to and dependence on law enforcement: "...he had to support police and the good of society, which, he remarked very quietly, would take care, down in Surrey, that these unsocial impulses, bred more than anything by the lack of good blood, were held in control" (102). Surrey is the site of an institution where, Sir William claims, "they taught...a sense of proportion" (89), and the implications of forced incarceration and control over breeding and heredity are clear.⁵³ The use of the phrase "unfit to propagate" reinforces the connection between

⁵³ In his 1989 examination of the movement for legislation of voluntary sterilization in England between the world wars, John MacNicol identifies "institutional segregation" as

Sir William and eugenicist projects; although the passage specifically refers to the “propagation” of points of view, the language is so closely tied to reproduction that Woolf’s readers would certainly recognize the underlying references to the genetically “unfit.”⁵⁴

Sir William’s interaction with Septimus has specific resonances within a post-WWI controversy over the declining British birth rate, the “fitness” of the population, and the impact of war on marriage and childbearing. Anxieties about the “fitness” of British men were first raised by reports arising out of the Boer War offices, which indicated that 40 percent of military volunteers in the 1890s had to be rejected for medical reasons (Soloway “Counting” 140). The physical exams conducted for volunteer and conscripted soldiers during WWI heightened these concerns, particularly for eugenicists: in *Wise Parenthood*, written during WWI, Stopes notes, “It is indeed serious for any race when ... less than half of the population is ‘physically fit,’ even when fitness is judged by the comparatively low standard of present-day needs” (18). Eugenicists also quickly picked up and publicized the idea that volunteers for military service were depriving the nation of valuable genetic material if killed in combat, while the new generation of British citizens would be “produced by the surviving, inferior C3 types and

an alternative to sterilization that many doctors preferred because it implied fewer “legalistic safeguards” and therefore room for doctors to exercise their discretion in controlling patients’ reproductive lives (155).

⁵⁴ Hauck also specifically notes this resonance: “‘Lunatics,’ the objects of Sir William’s treatment, were, in fact, along with epileptics, criminals, and so-called idiots, primary targets of eugenicists, who advocated such means as involuntary sterilization to protect the ‘race.’ It is not difficult to imagine Sir William threatening recalcitrant patients with such treatment, not only pronouncing them ‘unfit’ to ‘propagate their views,’ but literally ‘unfitting’ them to propagate at all” (24).

worse whose physical and mental disabilities rendered them unfit for combat” (Soloway “Eugenics” 374). During the war, members of the British Eugenics Society, as well as pro-natalists of all ideologies, supported programs like tax breaks for middle- and upper-class parents (375) and reduced marriage license fees for soldiers’ weddings (377) in order to increase the birth rate among the most “fit” British citizens.

Following the Armistice, however, the question of genetic fitness became more complicated than it had been before the war. Doctors and eugenicists agreed that physically wounded soldiers were still highly viable genetically: Soloway notes that genetic scientist R.A. Fisher adjured British women to marry wounded soldiers because the “‘injuries of war last but for one generation.’ Their children, he assured them, would receive ‘as a natural dower, a constitution unimpaired, and the power to become all that their father might have been’” (378). However, victims of shell shock were another story. Ted Bogacz argues in his 1989 article on the War Office Committee Enquiry into Shell Shock that mental illness among WWI veterans “not only challenged long-held medical opinions about the nature and treatment of mental illness but seemed to demand that the very well-springs of human behaviour be explored anew” (227). If physical injuries such as missing limbs or gas burns were not transmissible to veterans’ offspring, there was the possibility that mental illness caused by battle could signify a moral or genetic degeneracy that could lead to the degradation of soldiers’ children and grandchildren. Bogacz notes that during the hearings for the 1922 report by the Shell Shock Enquiry, “some witnesses tried to pass off the shell-shock crisis as all a matter of social or

hereditary background” (249), but were frustrated by the testimony of high-ranking officers and upper-class soldiers who suffered from “war neurosis” (247).

Septimus’s case reflects the dilemma returning soldiers posed for eugenicists: as “one of the first to volunteer” in the war effort, he would be assumed to be part of the “A1 population” the British government and pro-natalists were trying to grow (Soloway “Eugenics” 370); however, his valor in war may be compromised by the genetic deficiency implied by his breakdown, particularly because he is a member of the working class. Sir William adopts an attitude toward Septimus that Bogacz describes as common to psychologists and members of the War Office Committee in their dealings with shell shock victims:

The physician’s attitude toward the hysteric and neurasthenic was often one of moral condemnation: they were seen as morally depraved, willful, and egotistic. These judgments led the physician to stress ‘discipline, chastisement and even punishment’ as part of the therapeutic process. Such attitudes would reappear in the treatment of shell-shock during the war and in the final report of the ‘Shell Shock’ Committee. (231)

Sir William’s treatment of Septimus conforms to this description, but also displays an anxiety about Septimus’s conjugal life, perhaps arising from the “natural respect for breeding” that causes his immediate negative response to Septimus himself (97). His concern that Septimus will reproduce is particularly clear in his justification for separating Rezia from her husband during his recovery: “the people we care for most are not good for us when we are ill” (96). Sir William’s enforced separation of married

couples goes against Rezia's intuition that she could be helpful to Septimus in his illness (146-7), but reinforces his eugenicist perspective that despite his wartime heroics, Septimus is "unfit" to have a sexual and potentially reproductive relationship.

Sir William's view of Septimus's "fitness" reflects Septimus's own concerns about sexuality and reproduction. Discussing male impotence in 1926's *Enduring Passion*, Stopes refers to the relationship between shell shock and sexuality, an issue that also preoccupied Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*: "...prolonged and very great mental strain, such as was experienced by men suffering from shell shock, or those very sensitive to the horrors of the war, led to a reaction which amounted almost to sex impotence in a number of men" (52). Like the men Stopes describes, Septimus appears to be rendered mentally as well as physically unable to have sex with Rezia by his shell shock. Septimus's horror of sex seems confined to heterosexual intercourse, as part of the "message" he has received is "Love between man and woman was repulsive to Shakespeare" (89). Several critics, including Eileen Barrett, have argued that this is because of Septimus's homosexuality, and that Woolf's depiction of his and Rezia's relationship reveals the psychic damage caused by heteronormativity (154). However, I want to call attention to the fact that what seems to offend Septimus is not female genitalia, per se (or only), but the connection between male-female intercourse and pregnancy. He thinks, while reading *Antony and Cleopatra*, "How Shakespeare loathed humanity—the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly. ... The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair" (88). Directly following the assertion "Love between man and woman was repulsive to

Shakespeare” is a further association of sex with childbearing: “But, Rezia said, she must have children. They had been married five years” (89). Septimus’s rejection of reproduction results from his fear of being responsible for the continuation of the human race: “One cannot bring children into a world like this. One cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of these lustful animals...” (89). In addition, he fears passing down his own failure and madness to his children, as his preoccupation with the “secret signal,” a reference to genetics and heredity, demonstrates. While Sir Willliam wants to prevent Septimus from reproducing in the name of advancement for the human race, Septimus sees this project as hopeless, and fights reproduction because of its implied insistence on disguising “loathing, hatred, despair” with narratives of human progress and familial love. In Septimus’s self-loathing and fear of reproducing himself, we see Woolf’s poignant eugenic anxiety about mental illness, expressed in her comment about the “feeble-minded” Londoners, “they should certainly be killed.” However, Woolf’s condemnation of Sir William’s desire to enforce a specific narrative of progress, one that controls the fertility of his “mad” patients through isolation, ascribes agency to Septimus that medically-mandated eugenics programs do not, suggesting that despite his insanity, he and Rezia should have the right to control their own reproductive choices.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ I am not suggesting that Woolf endorses Septimus and Rezia having children in these passages; her emphasis on Septimus’s desire not to have children would undermine a reading of him as a potentially positive father figure. Rather, Sir William’s undue interference in their relationship and its resonance with violent government interference in the sexual and reproductive lives of returning soldiers de-authorizes the medical establishment’s role in reproductive planning, returning the decision-making power over reproduction to individual couples, including “unfit” couples like Septimus and Rezia.

Rezia is the only character in this triangle whose investment in reproduction does not correspond to public narratives about human progress, but to her own personal narrative as an Italian⁵⁶ war wife in London. Woolf depicts Septimus's descent into insanity as a conversation between Septimus and Rezia over whether to have children; the conversation ends with Rezia's perspective: "*She* could not grow old and have no children! She was very lonely, she was very unhappy!" Her breakdown leads to Septimus's "melodramatic gesture," acceding to her idea that "people must be sent for" (90). In a gender reversal of Virginia and Leonard Woolf's positions in 1913, Rezia apparently calls in outside authorities not to determine if it is safe for Septimus to be a father, but to convince him to have a child. Dr. Holmes, while terrifying to Septimus, is comforting to Rezia. Her attraction to him arises from his conventional fatherly/husbandly role: he has "four little children." Holmes takes on a persona Septimus (and Woolf's readers) read as condescending, but his attention to Rezia and her role as Septimus's wife—calling Septimus's notice to her as a "charming little lady," "quite a girl" (92)—offers her recognition and responsibility in his recovery that Sir William does

⁵⁶ Aména Möinfaar has suggested to me that Rezia's national identity is important not only in terms of her "otherness" to the novel's depictions of English culture and anxiety about the English "race," but also because of the symbolic association between Mediterranean women and sexuality and fertility. In *Married Love*, Stopes notes, "It is also true that in our northern climate women are on the whole less persistently stirred than the southerners" (38). Mia Carter has pointed out that Woolf herself drew sharp distinctions between the temperaments of English and Mediterranean peoples in her diaries from trips to Greece, Turkey, and Italy (71); at one point, Woolf describes an Italian acquaintance—also named Rezia—as "A woman one guesses of many passions; with a great fervour for life" (*Passionate Apprentice* 397).

not, giving her hope that she will eventually be able to fill the wife/mother role she expected when she married Septimus.

Significantly, though, Rezia seems attached not to motherhood and wifedom in general, but to the idea of reproducing with her husband: “She must have a son like Septimus, she said. But nobody could be like Septimus; so gentle; so serious; so clever” (89). While Septimus fears the heredity he will pass on to the next generation, Rezia hopes that Septimus’s intelligence, his sensitivity, and his bravery will be passed on to her children—in a romantic gesture based in ideas of heredity, she wants a “son like Septimus,” a copy of her (idealized view of her) husband. Rezia’s attachment to Septimus’s genetic structure reflects her lack of connection to the eugenics/heredity narrative to which Sir William adheres. Specifically, she is unaware of the way in which post-WWI “shell shock” like Septimus’s was publicly understood as connected to heredity. Ultimately, the Shell Shock Enquiry of 1922 concluded that shell shock did indeed represent an individual failing of courage or loyalty, caused by “congenital or acquired predisposition to pathological reaction in the individual concerned” (Zwedling 30). The report itself echoes Septimus’s anxiety that the damage he and other shell-shocked veterans have sustained may not be incidental, but “congenital,” and therefore possibly transmittable (like Septimus’s “loathing, hatred, despair”) to one’s children.

Rezia’s tragic naïveté about Septimus’s possibilities for recovery collides with both Septimus’s own resistance to passing on his genetic code and Sir William’s desire to control her reproductive future when Sir William suggests separating the couple, a plan that causes her “such agony” (98). The tragic subordination of Rezia’s desire for children

to a public narrative (controlled by the medical establishment) about the transmission of hereditary madness reflects Woolf's feelings about her own experiences with childlessness as acutely as Septimus's illness reflects her helplessness as a mental health patient. *Mrs. Dalloway's* depiction of Septimus and Rezia's argument over whether to have children and Rezia's resistance to Sir William's plan to separate the couple thus indicate Woolf's recognition of the interconnectedness of public and private narratives of childbearing. *Mrs. Dalloway* offers an early example of Woolf's dramatization of the connections between the private family drama and public narratives of reproduction, which exert force on the family but are threatened and swayed by citizens' personal choices. Rezia's desire for a child arises in part from her personal maternal urges (she plays with and cuddles Mrs. Filmer's granddaughter "every night of their lives" (144)), and in part from her immersion in traditional narratives of motherhood (She cries when she tells Septimus about Mrs. Filmer's daughter's pregnancy. "She could not grow old and have no children!" (90)). Septimus's resistance to children also reflects both his shellshock-induced paranoia and his Malthusian understanding of a shrinking and degenerate world, while Sir William tries to impose a public narrative of progress on his patients' private reproductive choices.

Woolf's depiction of the conflict among these perspectives sheds light on the paradoxical ways in which discourse about fertility control disempowered female subjects like Rezia even as it claimed to expand their reproductive options. In *Married Love*, Stopes extols the benefits to women of planned pregnancies: "While in the whole human relation there is no slavery or torture so horrible as coerced, unwilling

motherhood, there is no joy and pride greater than that of a woman who is bearing the developing child of a man she adores” (84). Though this claim places women’s personal reproductive choices at the center of Stopes’s ideal for fertility control, in other parts of her writing, Stopes prioritizes the social desirability of a child’s birth over any particular woman’s wish for children. Summing up her chapter on “Children” in *Married Love*, she makes it clear that the ultimate purpose of birth control is to better “the race” rather than the lives of individual mothers:

Only those actions are worthy which lead the race onwards to a higher and fuller completion and the perfecting of its powers, which steer the race into the main current of that stream of life and vitality which courses through us and impels us forward.

It is the sacred duty of all who dare to hand on the awe-inspiring gift of life, to hand it on a vessel as fit and perfect as they can fashion, so that the body may be the strongest and most beautiful instrument possible. (88-9)

While Rezia would fit the initial condition Stopes sets up for “joy and pride” in motherhood, as she obviously adores Septimus, her desire for children is negated under the mandate for human reproduction to “lead the race onwards,” a mandate Stopes proposes and Sir William enforces on his patients. Like Woolf herself, Rezia experiences a loss of control over her fertility not because of the over-reproduction Stopes posits as a danger to women, but because of the political and medical narratives of racial progress and “fit” parenthood that birth control and eugenics discourses both authorized following WWI.

Fertility Control at Mrs. Dalloway's Party

The final scenes of *Mrs. Dalloway*, at Clarissa's party, again re-center the novel on narratives of reproduction, drawing together Woolf's commentary on the decline of the conservative upper classes with portrayals of Edwardian family life. Though analyses of the novel's ending usually focus on Clarissa's discovery of Septimus's suicide and her feeling "somehow very like him" (186), the novel actually ends with a series of references to the children of the party-goers, forcefully reminding the reader that although Clarissa and Septimus see the attraction of death and ending, humanity and heredity—Septimus's "loathing, despair, hatred"—move inexorably forward. Peter notes to Sally Seton (now Lady Rosseter), "Everybody in the room has six sons at Eton" (189). Sally herself has "five enormous boys" (171) whom she visits at Eton, but Peter "thank God, had none. No sons, no daughters, no wife" (189). Comparing Clarissa with Sally as Sally converses about her sons and her garden, Peter thinks, "Now all that Clarissa had escaped, unmaternal as she was" (190). Peter's idea that Clarissa has "escaped" Sally's domestic life is interesting in part for its focus on her nature as a mother—"maternal" (by implication) Sally has five children, while "unmaternal" Clarissa has only one, which implies that the women made choices reflecting their childbearing preferences (rather than having those choices curtailed by their husbands' preferences, a lack of contraception, or medical discourses like those Rezia encounters). Peter's generalizing comment about the sons of "everybody in the room" emphasizes again the strong relationship between class and reproduction in the novel, calling attention to the banality associated with the reproduction of the conservative elite, who do not value

children, as Rezia does, or fear for their future, as Septimus does. Sally illustrates this mindset: though Peter imbues her with “the softness of motherhood; its egotism too,” she apparently discusses her garden with the same pride and volubility as she discusses her sons: “And so she would go on, Peter felt, hour after hour; the miner’s son; people thought she had married beneath her; her five sons; and what was the other thing—plants, hydrangeas, syringas, very, very rare hibiscus lilies that never grow north of the Suez Canal, but she, with one gardener in a suburb near Manchester, had beds of them, positively beds!” (190). Both her family and her garden associate Sally with fertility, but it is an insipid, conventional fertility, attaching her strongly to the social order she had undermined and despised as a young woman at Bourton; as Clarissa thinks, “[t]he lustre had gone out of her” (171).

Clarissa herself is not immune to the changes of time, as reference to her age throughout the novel highlight. However, what Peter seems only vaguely aware of in describing her as “unmaternal” is the deep unconventionality in her approach to her relationships, an unconventionality Jesse Wolfe (2005) has attractively described as “psychic dynamism”:

Clarissa’s marriage...establishes opportunities for her own self-questioning, her psychic dynamism...In the modern vein, she exercises her freedom of choice, opting for one imperfect life rather than another, never losing sight of the fact that her choice was—and remains—a choice that entails sacrifice, never taking refuge in the false comfort of a philosophy of inevitability or of religion. (55)

Wolfe suggests that Clarissa retains a self-awareness denied to the other characters in Woolf's novel because her ability to recognize and refusal to categories her different attractions to Sally, Peter, and Richard.

I believe Clarissa's ability to retain her "freedom of choice" can be connected to Woolf's depiction of fertility control in the novel, and particularly of its exemplifying product, the Dalloways' only child, Elizabeth. Almost the final moment in the novel is Richard Dalloway's compliment to his daughter: "And he had not meant to tell her, but he couldn't help telling her. He had looked at her, he said, and he had wondered, Who is that lovely girl? and it was his daughter!" (194). Sally is impressed with this exchange because she believes it shows "they are devoted to each other" (194); however, Richard's failure to recognize Elizabeth implies not her connection and continuation of the Dalloway way of life, but her separation from and incompatibility with it. Moreover, Elizabeth's thoughts are not with her father, but with her "poor dog," who has been shut up during the party. Elizabeth's attachment to her dog, like her religious preoccupations and her relationship with the sinister Miss Kilman, indicates her detachment from a stereotypical young woman's interest in courtship, marriage, and family. Her rebellion against traditional narratives for her life recalls Elizabeth Cullingford's arguments about only children in the work of Elizabeth Bowen: according to Cullingford, Bowen "uses the only child...as a positive challenge to the pro-natalism of organic family and narrative structures" (289). If Clarissa repressed her fantasies of rebellion and attraction to women in favor of her proclivities as a hostess and desire for a conventional lifestyle, it seems that her daughter will not do the same. By representing Elizabeth as an only child and

emphasizing her difference from her family, Woolf indicates the possibilities for freedom that birth control can offer not only to mothers, but also to children, and to society as a whole, forestalling the Malthusian crisis Septimus envisions for the world and offering both parents and children the potential for critical engagement with the structures of their culture and traditions.⁵⁷ Perhaps Woolf suggests that controlled fertility is a way to mitigate both the despair of the shell-shocked soldier and the inanity of middle-class London's perpetual state of denial about the effects of imperialism and war.

Three Guineas: Woolf's Anti-fascist Prophylaxis

If *Mrs. Dalloway* reveals Woolf's sense of the connections between decision-making within families and the politics of birth control, *Three Guineas* solidifies those connections. Woolf's oft-studied parallels between fascism and patriarchy lend themselves to another point of connection between the personal and the political in the 1930's: family size and reproductive control. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf's lifelong regrets over her failure to retain control of her fertility and her interest in women's liberation from patriarchy collided to reveal her alignment with the pro-contraception movement's core values. Though the text only obliquely references contraception, reading it through the lens of birth control politics reveals its connections to the movement's ideology and rhetorical strategies: titled after the price of an illegal abortion in interwar England, it

⁵⁷ Of course, Sir William and Lady Bradshaw have only one child, as well. Possibly significant here is the fact that their child is a son, being educated at Eton. Certainly, the Bradshaws represent a narrative of progress that emphasizes conventionality over innovation, and their failure to reproduce more than once, despite the fact that Lady Bradshaw "would have liked a daughter too" (95), could hint at the inadequacy and impossibility of their ideals. See Hauck pp. 22-4 for a more nuanced discussion of the differences between the Dalloways and the Bradshaws as one-child families.

connects birth control advocacy with feminist rebellion; it appeals to its audience with references to an ideal of motherhood and an “uplifted race” that suggest the influence of eugenics; and it ultimately argues for a new world (a re-visioned *Herland*, one might say) that prioritizes women’s agency over their own reproductive bodies. *Three Guineas*’ subtle pro-contraceptive rhetoric relied on Woolf’s audience’s knowledge of the birth control debates and acceptance of the importance of reproductive control—an acceptance we have come to see as so commonplace we often overlook its radical presence in interwar texts. Woolf’s association of reproductive control with women’s political power appears subtly throughout *Three Guineas*: here, I will discuss the work’s title, Woolf’s footnotes about reproduction and women’s political power, and her discussion of literal and metaphorical reproductive control in relation to childbirth and “brain chastity.” I argue that these references, taken together, establish contraception as a structural metaphor in *Three Guineas*, appearing as a precondition for women’s control in intellectual, professional, and political pursuits, as indeed twentieth-century feminism has recognized reproductive agency as an underlying necessity for women’s liberation.

Woolf’s awareness of contraception as an “underlying necessity” for women’s equality is of course also apparent in *A Room of One’s Own*, which finds her hypothetical woman genius Judith Shakespeare pregnant and destitute as a result of her forays into a literary career. Hauck argues, “Birth control emerges in *A Room of One’s Own* as a cause of the greater professional and artistic freedom experienced by women in the early twentieth century” (19-20). Although there are references to its titular connection to abortion debates in several articles, feminist literary critics have largely failed to notice

the political importance of reproductive control to “professional and artistic freedom” as represented in *Three Guineas*, in keeping with a general failure of literary criticism to historicize women’s decisions about conception/contraception. One argument regarding the symbolic importance of motherhood in *Three Guineas*, Erin G. Carlston’s discussion of maternity as a site of resistance to fascism in her 1998 book *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity*, highlights the changing material landscape of childbearing, but notably does not discuss birth control politics:

[Woolf] does not consider that maternity is either women’s duty or the only labor suited to them. ... She mistrusts the concept of ‘nature’ and is quick to point out that bodies and natures are not outside of historical processes. ... The material conditions of childbirth, for example, can change: to cite only one obvious transformation in the technologies of reproduction, the introduction of chloroform ... meant that childbirth in the 1930s was no longer as dangerous and exhausting as it had been. (170)

Carlston omits any discussion of the “technologies of reproduction” that might help women to avoid childbirth, and she fails to note that Woolf’s rejection of “nature” reflects an ongoing argument between pro- and anti-contraception advocates that I reviewed in Chapter Two of this work. The continual effort to prevent conception seems as significant in women’s lives (and literary representations thereof) as more comfortable childbirth, but is often overlooked even by critics who emphasize women’s material history.

Reading through the lens of birth control technology and politics, however, we can see that maternity, fertility, and reproductive choice appear symbolically and literally throughout Woolf's feminist anti-fascist discourse. Woolf did not begin writing *Three Guineas* as an anti-fascist political text, but as a series of sketches entitled *Professions for Women*, which grew out of a speech she made (with Ethel Smythe) to the "London and National Society for Women's Service" in 1931 and were incorporated into an early version of *The Years*, the "novel-essay" *The Pargiters* (Lee 590-1). Carlston argues that while Woolf began *Three Guineas* not considering fascism a significant part of her argument, "As the [1930s] wore on, the connection between sexism and fascism became more apparent to her, and the broader concern with attacking fascism's hydra-headed manifestations in the spheres of culture and sexuality became more central to her text" (173). Woolf's insistence on the "hydra-headedness" of fascist politics is apparent in her placement of quotations from Hitler and Mussolini alongside sexist proclamations from English authorities. In her discussion of the "atmosphere" hindering women in the professions, Woolf forcefully draws comparisons between the reactionary politics of fascist leaders and "traditional" English views on gender:

Let us quote again: 'Homes are the real places of the women who are now compelling men to be idle. It is time the Government insisted upon employers giving work to more men, thus enabling them to marry the women they cannot now approach.' Place beside it another quotation: 'There are two worlds in the life of the nation, the world of men and the world of women. Nature has done well to entrust the man with the care of

his family and the nation. The women's world is her family, her husband, her children, and her home.' One is written in English, the other in German. But where is the difference? ... Are they not both the voices of Dictators...? (65)

The first of these quotations is one Woolf has previously identified as from a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*; the second is from a speech by Hitler that is excerpted in an article in Woolf's *Three Guineas* scrapbook, "Praise for Women: Their Part in the 'Nazi Triumph'" (from the *Sunday Times*, September 13, 1936) (Pawlowski 40). Woolf's alignment of these passages demonstrates her claim that fascism's strict delineation of sex roles arose out of a sense of patriarchal entitlement and denial of women's humanity common throughout Western culture. Her identification of *Telegraph* readers with Hitler is a rare attack on the male audience of *Three Guineas*.⁵⁸ More significantly, this drawing together of fascism and English sexism is also one of the comparatively rare instances in the text in which Woolf refers to motherhood; the majority of the second chapter, which specifically addresses women in the professions, focuses on women as wives and daughters rather than as mothers. By making a point of referencing motherhood when she discusses English and German dictatorship, Woolf highlights women's reproductive

⁵⁸ Zwerdling notes Woolf's rhetorical choice to be as inoffensive as possible in the text: "Her perspective on masculine culture [in *Three Guineas*] is thoroughly critical. But her rhetorical choices are determined by the need to avoid offending the males in her audience so seriously that they will stop reading the book. So she invents the well-meaning male correspondent who writes asking her how war might be prevented—a symbolic figure designed to represent the confused, liberal, established man with feminist sympathies who are the audience the book most needs to reach" (259).

choice as central to the project of overcoming fascism in all of its foreign and domestic manifestations.

Woolf's identification of fascism with limitations on women's agency in reproduction and marriage is historically apt. Fascist leaders in the 1930s not only adopted pro-natalist discourses to encourage their non-Jewish, non-Romani, eugenically "fit" female subjects to reproduce and focus on motherhood and home life, but they also specifically legislated against women's reproductive choice. In fact, fascist nationalism in Germany and Italy was specifically associated with anti-birth control legislation, as Patricia Albanese has shown in her 2006 demographic study *Mothers of the Nation: Women, Families, and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Europe*. In 1933, abortion became a "crime against the race" in Germany, and "special courts were established with the power to impose the death penalty for those who performed illegal abortions" (Albanese 35). In Italy, the sale of contraceptives and "birth control propaganda" was forbidden by "royal decree" in 1931, a ban that was not lifted until 1971 (146). In addition, in fascist Italy, "doctors were ordered to report and register all pregnancies, to ensure abortions would not take place" (57), cementing the control of the government and the medical establishment over women's bodies. Although legislation surrounding birth control in Britain was relatively liberal in the 1930's (the Infant Life Preservation Act of 1929 offered a *de facto* window of 28 weeks within which a doctor could perform an abortion (Stetson 135), and contraception was never criminalized in Britain), pro-natalist sentiment was high in the interwar period. In the *Telegraph* letters Woolf cites, for example, we can read not only economic anxiety over women taking jobs from men, but

also anxiety over wasted reproductive potential: if men “cannot now approach” the women they want to marry, then those women will not have long reproductive lives. Soloway has shown that one of the significant controversies over women’s work during and after WWI related to the question of whether being self-sufficient would encourage or discourage them from marrying young (380). Woolf’s association of fascism with sexism, then, has a material connection with the experiences of women in Central Europe and England who (like Woolf) encountered male authority over their reproductive lives.

Closely connected with the pro-natalist schemes of Hitler and Mussolini and fascism’s presence in England is the subject of eugenics, which had fallen from its mainstream position in Britain during WWI but whose adherents were relatively prominent in the birth control movement and in nationalist circles. (Marie Stopes, for example, strongly supported eugenics throughout her lifetime, a stance that caused a rift with her son when in 1947 he chose to marry a woman with vision problems (Rose 234)). Woolf appeals to enduring eugenic beliefs in *Three Guineas* in a way that has reinforced critiques of her class myopia and snobbiness in the book. Often cited as evidence of the troubling politics of *Three Guineas* is Woolf’s use of eugenic assumptions to defend her suggestion that “a wage...be paid by the State legally to the mothers of educated men” (130):

Consider, even at the risk of a digression, what effect this would have upon the birth rate, in the very class where the birth-rate is falling, in the very class where births are desirable—the educated class. Just as the increase in the pay of soldiers has resulted, the papers say, in additional

recruits to the force of arms-bearers, so the same inducement would serve to recruit the child-bearing force, which we can hardly deny to be as necessary and as honourable, but which, because of its poverty, and its hardships, is now failing to attract recruits. (131)

Though Woolf seems to tap into arguments surrounding the economic valuation of motherhood made by such different feminists as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in her 1898 *Women and Economics*, and Shulamith Firestone in her 1970 *Dialectic of Sex*, her statement in support of salaries for mothers may be undermined by its relationship to her central argument in *Three Guineas*. In his 2001 book, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration*, Childs claims that in this passage “Woolf recruits soldiers for the biological war that must be won by positive eugenics if England is to produce the ‘desirable’ kind of future citizen” (23). His reading, however, overlooks the potential irony of Woolf’s use of the language of battle—“child-bearing force,” “recruits”—to describe motherhood in a pacifist text. In particular, Woolf’s naming of motherhood “as necessary and as honourable” as bearing arms in battle surely expresses ambivalence about the positive eugenics view she outwardly promotes, since arms-bearing is not presented as “necessary” or “honourable” in *Three Guineas*.

An examination of the paragraph in which the above passage appears reveals it as full of ironic appeals to the benefits for men of women’s paid housework. Woolf claims that if mothers were paid a wage, “No longer would [husbands] be the Saturday caller, the albatross on the neck of society, the sympathy addict, the deflated work slave calling for replenishment” (132). Woolf’s informing her male audience of its status as

“albatross” at the same time she offers redemption from that status must surely be read as an ironic joke on that imagined male audience, who may believe they rule families and nations, but are actually “wage slaves” to the patriarchal capitalist system that requires them to support their wives. The entire paragraph is fraught with tension between a literal reading of Woolf’s appeals to the “educated man” to whom the letter that comprises *Three Guineas* is addressed and an ironic reading from a female perspective aligned with that of the speaker, which takes pleasure in her depictions of men’s weaknesses. This reading also casts doubt on the speaker’s sincerity in assuming that women want to have more children and are prevented from doing so due to finances, especially since this idea was already undermined by the lamentations of eugenicists that, statistically speaking, the wealthy classes had the smallest families.⁵⁹

In a discussion of the unpaid labor of female homemakers in the second chapter of *Three Guineas*, Woolf sheds light on the specific version of eugenics discourse she participates in: the prevention-focused, small-family model associated with the birth control movement. Arguing for an end to women’s relegation to the “unpaid professions,” she claims, “[t]he intensive childbirth of the unpaid wife, the intensive money-making of the paid husband in the Victorian Age had terrible results, we cannot doubt, upon the mind and body of the present age” (95). The idea that what Woolf calls “the [Victorian] profession that consists in bringing nine or ten children into the world”

⁵⁹ Stopes’s *Wise Parenthood* even includes a list of birth rates by profession: teachers/professors and ministers, according to her statistics, had the lowest birth rates (in 1911), and “general labourers” had the highest (17). This leads her to the conclusion that “the *numbers* of our population increasingly tend to be made up from the less thrifty and the less conscientious” (18).

(93) has had continuing effects on the *body* in addition to the education or mental attitudes of English citizens in the 1930's suggests that there may be a genetic component to the "terrible results." This understanding of genetics is markedly Lamarckian in its assumption that acquired traits—for example, the physical weakness and mental stuntedness of the over-fertile mother—can be passed to offspring. It is also, like Nella Larsen's representations of intra-family degeneration in *Quicksand*, in line with mainline birth control propaganda, which insisted that later-born children in large families were inherently weaker and more susceptible to genetic defects than children in smaller families. I have previously quoted Stopes's assertion about the decreasing "vitality" of children in large families: "Save where the woman is exceptional, each child following so rapidly on its predecessor, saps and divides the vital strength which is available for the making of offspring. This generally lowers the vitality of each succeeding child, and surely, even if slowly, may murder the woman who bears them" (87). Woolf's concern in this passage for the health of Victorian women and their descendants therefore implicates her as a participant not in eugenics propaganda, but in birth control discourse, which marshaled public narratives about social health and "hygiene" to advocate for women's complete control over the spacing and number of their children.

Woolf's use of eugenic rhetoric indicates that she buys into the paradoxical assumption of birth control advocates that working class women desire "freedom from" motherhood while middle- and upper-class women desire "freedom to" be mothers according to their own schedules and desires. However, her emphasis on women's agency and personal investment in these decisions is a significant departure from

mainline eugenics rhetoric, which emphasizes “the greater good” in arguments about reproduction. *Three Guineas* as an anti-fascist/anti-patriarchal text rejects male-dominated paradigms of reproductive politics that focus on the state’s role in promoting or limiting the growth of various populations, by insisting on the primacy of women’s education and decision-making in the realm of reproduction as well as in professional and academic life. Without directly arguing this point, Woolf brings to the reader’s attention a new public narrative about reproduction in which women ultimately control the reproduction of the “polis,” and as a collective can, through reproductive control, direct the resources of the nation.

“Most Inadvisable”: *Three Guineas*’s Representations of Women’s Reproductive Control

Lee and Childs, among others, have noted that the title of *Three Guineas* may be a reference to the price of an illegal abortion in Great Britain in the 1930’s (Lee 331; Childs 36). The tri-partite structure of *Three Guineas* draws the reader’s attention to the title repeatedly, so that although Woolf does not offer an explanation of the reference, she may expect her audience to see the connections between her arguments in favor of women’s professional and reproductive freedom. However, Woolf originally included a more explicit discussion of abortion in her *Three Guineas/The Years* project, a discussion which also alluded to abortion through a reference to its price. Lee quotes this lengthy passage from a holograph she identifies as part of *The Pargiters*, Woolf’s novel-essay that eventually became the novel *The Years* and the long essay *Three Guineas*:

‘Look at those wretched little children’ said Rose, looking down into the street.

‘Stop them, then’ said Maggie. ‘Stop them having children.’

‘But you cant’ said Rose.

‘Oh nonsense, my dear Rose,’ said Elvira. ‘What you do is this: you ring a bell in Harley Street. Sir John at home? Step this way, ma’am. Now Sir John, you say casting your eyes this way & that way, the fact of the matter is, ~~my husband~~’ whereupon you blush. Most inadvisable, most inadvisable, he says, the welfare of the human race—sacrifice, private interests—~~three~~ six words on half a sheet of paper. ~~A tip~~. [In the margin: Three guineas in his left hand]. Out you go—well that’s all. What I mean is, in plain language, ~~if that woman Maggie says she wont have a child,~~ she wont [have] a child [...] ‘We wouldnt have children if we didnt want them,’ said Maggie. (qtd. in Lee 330)

Maggie’s ideal is not abstinence, which some have claimed Woolf supports in *Three Guineas*, but fertility controlled by sexually active women who can manipulate their doctors. This passage reveals much about Woolf’s perspective in *Three Guineas*, where the ideal of free access to birth control undergirds her proposed revisions in women’s roles in the family and in public life.

While Childs does not offer a definitive reading of the above passage, he does suggest that “Sir John” may be telling his patient that abortion, not carrying a child, is “inadvisable”; in this (somewhat implausible) interpretation, he extrapolates, “Sir John’s

argument against abortion is similar to Woolf's argument against middle-class childlessness ... in *Three Guineas*" (36). This claim highlights Childs's misreading of Woolf's views on fertility control, not only in suggesting that Sir John may be against abortion, but also in implying that a male doctor character in Woolf's work may be read as a parallel to Woolf or to her female avatars in *The Years* or *Three Guineas*. The power differential Woolf consistently depicts between a male doctor, whose pronouncements can define "the welfare of the human race" and a pregnant woman or a woman like herself seeking advice about childbearing is too great for there to be any identification between the two figures. However, this passage from *The Years*, read alongside Woolf's insistence on women's agency in *Three Guineas*, offers a possibility for female empowerment in reproduction that is missing from *Mrs. Dalloway* and from Lee's understanding of Woolf's relationship with medicine. Significantly, Woolf's Elvira (Sara in the published version of *The Years*) describes the hypothetical pregnant woman here not purely as a supplicant for relief from over-fertility, but as a manipulator of the doctor and a co-conspirator with him. She "casts her eyes" in pretended desperation, refers to her husband in order to harness his authority for her actions, and blushes on command. The three guineas in the doctor's hand are not payment for legitimate services but "a tip" for his agreement to collude in the illegal act of abortion. As Maggie says, "We wouldnt have children if we didnt want them," indicating that women can have, if not independence from medical control over their reproductive choices, at least some agency within the parameters of that control—particularly if they are willing to instruct and conspire with each other, as Elvira suggests.

Maggie's use of "we" is also important, however, for its class ambiguity. The three women talking about reproductive control in the passage are middle-class, relatively well-off women, the "daughters of educated men" whom Woolf addresses in *Three Guineas*. One of the problems with Elvira's hypothesis is the economic difficulty of working class women obtaining the money and access to find a sympathetic doctor who will perform a safe illegal abortion. Childs has pointed out that Woolf acknowledges the unlikelihood of his scenario for the working class mothers of the "wretched little children" in Rose's response to Maggie and Elvira, "But how is that woman down there going to Harley Street? with three guineas?" (qtd. in Lee 330, Childs 36). So while Maggie's claim might be true for herself and her friends, who are only likely to have children if they want them, it may not apply to the broader "we"—womankind—to whom she and Elvira ascribe reproductive power.

Woolf also addresses the issue of class in *Three Guineas*, in her consideration of the possibilities for women who want to avoid having children. In one of the extensive footnotes to the text, Woolf engages with birth control advocates' argument that women's political preferences, particularly regarding war and peace, could and should be exhibited through their childbearing choices. She modifies her claim that her class, the "daughters of educated men," are the "weakest of all the classes" with the following footnote, which has raised some discussion of the mechanisms Woolf would suggest for fertility control:

There is of course one essential that the educated women can supply: children. And one method by which she can help to prevent war is to refuse to bear children. Thus Mrs. Helena Normanton is of the opinion that

‘The only thing that women in any country can do to prevent war is to stop the supply of ‘cannon fodder.’ ... The fact that the birth rate in the educated class is falling would seem to show that educated women are taking Mrs. Normanton’s advice. It was offered them in very similar circumstances over two thousand years ago by Lysistrata. (173-4)

In this passage Woolf draws attention the slippage between “educated women” and all women in public arguments about reproduction and insists on the different agency and motivation of “educated women” by using the adjective to modify every use of the word “women/woman” in her own voice. I would argue that her preoccupation with class indicates that she is aware of the difficulty of obtaining birth control for working class women, and that this awareness figures into the reference to Lysistrata, which has been misread as an indication of Woolf’s dismissal of sex within marriage. Hauck, for example, argues that Woolf “recommends sexual abstinence as a method of birth control” in the Lysistrata footnote (20); however, although Woolf’s lack of interest in heterosexual sex has been documented, the tendency of her argument in *Three Guineas* is not toward abstinence or repression, but toward enlarging the options for women’s sexual experiences. I would argue, rather, that Woolf uses the literary reference to both avoid a direct mention of the taboo topic of contraception and to suggest a possibility for unity among women—in *Lysistrata*, after all, women of different social classes joined forces not simply in refusing sex to men, but also in supporting each other financially, helping one another to trick and avoid the tricks of their husbands, and in advocating for a new ideology of social change. This multifaceted, “grassroots” enactment of women’s

opposition to war takes Maggie's ideal of women's reproductive choice beyond Elvira's class-blind suggestion.

Woolf's designation of "chastity" as an essential value for her "Society of Outsiders," like her use of *Lysistrata* as a model of political organization, begs the question of her investment in abstinence as a source of power for women. Some early twentieth-century feminists, like Gilman, deplored progressive women's increased focus on sex as a source of personal pleasure as well as of public equality with men. Woolf's argument that Victorian women who have been educated in "poverty, chastity, derision, and freedom from unreal loyalties" should maintain those virtues as they enter the professions seems to identify her with this point of view, even as she reminds us that it is "mental chastity" to which she refers. Woolf is not simply applying the lessons of one version of chastity (physical) to another version of chastity (mental), however. Rather, she reconfigures the definition of "chastity" to refer not to women's guarding their bodies from violation by the outside world, but to women guarding themselves from violating others through "unchaste" and anti-social mental and physical reproduction.

It is birth control that allows Woolf to claim that mental chastity does not exist alongside of but has replaced physical chastity as a chief virtue for womankind, as we see in her inclusion of the trope of contraception in her comparison of a prostitute with a writer of hack literature, who "sell[s her] mind without love" (111):

"'But what,' she may ask, 'is meant by 'selling your mind without love'?' 'Briefly,' we might reply, 'to write at the command of another person what you do not want to write for the sake of money. But to sell a brain is worse than to sell a body, for when the

body seller has sold her momentary pleasure she takes good care that the matter shall end there. But when a brain seller has sold her brain, its anemic, vicious and diseased progeny are let loose upon the world to infect and corrupt and sow the seeds of disease in others.” (111-2)

Going beyond the abstract “danger” of violating an abstract system of sexual mores, the danger of “brain selling,” or “mental chastity,” threatens “the world,” anyone who comes into contact with the offspring created by the fruitful union of “prostitute” and “procurator.” Building her argument around the assumption that it is not female purity but pragmatic concern for social welfare that is violated by the promiscuity of the prostitute/hack writer, Woolf adapts the well-worn metaphors of writing as childbirth and of the hack writer as a immoral mother,⁶⁰ relying on her audience’s understanding the means by which a prostitute “takes good care that the matter shall end there,” probably a reference to contraceptive douching or abortion. She implies, and expects her audience to agree, that the use of contraception mitigates the immorality of prostitution because it circumscribes the possibility for “progeny,” an assumption based on the value system of eugenics. The moral pragmatism implied in this passage reflects that of Stopes, who in

⁶⁰ The metaphor might be particularly associated with the eighteenth century, an era in which Woolf read deeply. Aphra Behn (in *The Rover*) and Alexander Poe (in *The Dunciad*) both employed it, but the example most apt to Woolf’s text may be found in Daniel Defoe’s 1718 *A Vindication of the Press*, in which Defoe, like Woolf, defends the dignity of the hack writer/prostitute on the grounds that the quality of their work is limited by the demands of the market economy: “these gentlemen, notwithstanding it be never so contrary to their Inclinations, are entirely oblig’d to prostrate their Pens to the Town, as Ladies of Pleasure do their Bodies . . .they should be permitted the Liberty of Writing and Printing of either Side for Bread, free from Ignominy; and as getting Money is the chief Business of the World, so their Measures cannot by any means be esteem’d Unjust or Disreputable” (21). Thank you to Molly Hardy for the Defoe reference.

Wise Parenthood declared, “This book is written essentially for the married. It is true that it may pass, directly or indirectly, into the hands of those who have not put any religious or civil seal on the bond of their love. But if it does, one can be sure that it will reduce, and not increase, the racial dangers which are so often coincident with illicit love” (26). Woolf’s speaker also reasserts the values of Sir William Bradshaw—order, health, and fertility control—in desiring for the limitation of the “progeny” of the hack writer; but she puts the power over fertility back in women’s hands, replacing Sir William’s confinement of the “unfit” in favor of *her*—the female writer’s—freedom of choice over the number and kind of her progeny. In addition, the contraceptive metaphor Woolf uses here carries the implication that physical chastity is harmful chiefly when it results in “unchecked progeny,” and therefore reinstates the possibility of women’s independent sexual pleasure, denigrated by the Victorian emphasis on “physical chastity.”

Despite her comparison of hack writers to prostitutes, Woolf makes clear her understanding of the material circumstances that lead women to these professions in her praise of the “courage” of “Mrs. Oliphant,” a hack writer who “prostituted her culture” in order to feed her family (109-10).⁶¹ Although Woolf does not see an easy way forward for the female intellectual, modifying her request to sign the pacifist “manifesto” to apply it only to “daughters of educated men who have enough to live upon” (111), she does see contraception as way to address power discrepancies common to all women. Perhaps most poignantly, contraception provides a way to absolve both writers and prostitutes of

⁶¹ Carlston has noted that “Woolf, like other left theorists of sexuality, analyzes commodified sexuality/culture as a consequence of inequitable power relations” (165), a position that is clearly evident throughout *Three Guineas*.

“the necessity that is laid upon those who have children to see that they are fed and clothed, nursed and educated” (110). Woolf’s references to a prostitute using contraception and to a woman feeding and clothing her family with her own earnings resonate with her text’s larger argument that women can and should be the sole arbiters of their sexual and professional destinies. Woolf’s emphasis on women’s control over their reproductive and financial lives reflects a key idea of the birth control movement, which placed particular weight on women’s complete power over the means of fertility prevention and over reproductive decision making. In *Wise Parenthood*, her contraception manual, Stopes suggests couples wishing to use contraception insert a “pessary” (diaphragm) rather than using a “sheath” (condom), arguing that “The one to whom the consequences of carelessness are most serious is, of course, the woman; she, therefore, is the one who should exercise the precaution” (26-7). We see a similar insistence on women’s greater concern and therefore greater need for decision-making power in Woolf’s prostitute who “takes good care that the matter shall end there,” seizing control over her reproductive potential without reference to her male customers.

A similar emphasis on women’s power not only over reproduction, but over nature itself is found in her brief discussion of childbirth in the third section of *Three Guineas*. Arguing that women are as fitted as men to work in the professions, she first posits the argument of the “priests and professors”: “Nature, the priests said, in her infinite wisdom, had laid down the unalterable law that man is the creator” (165-6). She then adds the rejoinder of the “daughters of educated men”: “And must we not, and do we not change this unalterable nature? By setting a match to a fire frost is defied;

Nature's decree of death is postponed. And the breakfast egg, they persisted, is it all the work of the cock? Without yolk, without white, how far would your breakfasts, oh priests and professors, be fertile?" (166). On one level, Woolf refers here to the ubiquity of changes to supposedly "natural" circumstances, a point Stopes makes in *Married Love*, noting "everything which separates man from animals is an interference with what such people commonly call 'Nature'" (88). On another level, though, Woolf refers to the changes women can make to "unalterable law" through their participation in political and economic spheres. Woolf's humorous references to "breakfast eggs" also call attention to women's agency in fertility creation and control. Again, Woolf insists that a woman's control over her fertility is indispensable to her full participation in public life, even as she also uses fertility control, represented by the "egg," as a metaphor for the range of positive interventions women could make in public life if given the opportunity. If the speaker of *Three Guineas* encourages men to help women achieve their feminist, anti-fascist aims, part of her intention is to establish women's power, ironizing her opening rhetorical claim that the "daughters of educated men" are "the weakest of all the classes" because their only power lies in "supplying children."

Woolf's speaker in *Three Guineas* distributes a guinea to three causes: one to women's education, one to women's advancement in "the professions," and one to the cause of peace for which her addressee advocates. The total number, and the title of her text, indicate that there exists an underlying cause of structural importance not only to Woolf's rhetoric but to the achievement of the feminist goals the text describes: reproductive rights. Woolf inserts abortion and contraception into a text that deals with

some of the major political issues of the birth control movement—women’s knowledge, women’s freedom of movement, and women’s role in nationalism and peacekeeping—providing a transitional text that portrays reliable reproductive choice as a necessary precursor, not an end goal, of the woman’s movement. Though its alliances with class power and eugenics (like those of the birth control movement itself) complicate its message, *Three Guineas* successfully addresses Woolf’s own sense of powerlessness over her reproductive choices, replacing the authority of Sir William Bradshaw with that of a prostitute who can control her own fertility.

The conflict between public and private narratives of reproduction, between Sir William and Rezia, between the addressee of *Three Guineas* and the Victorian wife, preoccupied Woolf throughout her career, despite her seeming avoidance of the themes of sexuality and childbearing in many of her works. Through the lens of birth control discourse, we can read *Three Guineas* as her renegotiation of these narratives in a way that places women in positions of power through individual and collective fertility control. Like birth control advocates in England and the United States, Woolf manipulates political narratives surrounding fertility and sexuality in ways that are disempowering and dismissive of some of her readers even as they ostensibly elevate all women’s agency. This problematic rhetoric presages as well as echoes ongoing dilemmas in feminist reproductive rights rhetoric and merits study as further evidence of Woolf’s multi-valenced interaction with twentieth-century feminism’s central conflicts and concerns. In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Three Guineas*, Woolf connects the personal, political, private, and public aspects of reproductive choice in challenging and sometimes

disturbing ways, but her recognition and entrance into the power dynamics surrounding fertility control issues marks her work as highly significant to a study of early discourse on these issues and part of an ongoing feminist conversation about who ideally and actually has control over women's reproductive bodies.

Conclusion

Birth Control and Twentieth Century Narratives of “*The Erotic*”

In her 2000 article on the late eighteenth-century Irish national narrative, “Acts of Union: Sexuality and Nationalism, Romance and Realism in the Irish National Tale,” Lisa L. Moore describes her desire to articulate the material creation of “*the erotic*” in canonical Western literature:

[This article] is an attempt to contribute both to the history of sexuality, by analyzing a moment in which a specific version of heterosexual desire came to be understood as *the erotic* through its naturalization in novel form, and to a political analysis of that history, one that begins to speculate about what interests are served, and what excluded, by this move. (Moore 129)

This dissertation attempts a similar move, both in identifying a significant shift in conceptions of “*the erotic*” and in questioning the political implications of that shift and its representation in literature. While early twentieth century birth control advocates created a sense that birth control “freed” men and women from the sex roles naturalized by 18th and 19th century romantic narratives, this project suggests that the paradigm shift in public understandings of sexuality is dependent as much on the ideology as on the material accessibility and technology of contraception, and is characterized by specific value structures that elevated some social/reproductive actors at the expense of excluding and denigrating others. The authors examined in this dissertation both adhere to and disrupt birth control movement ideologies, but as I have argued, they consistently reflect

the changed nature of public conceptions of both “*the erotic*” and of its traditional corollary, the family narrative.

Just as the heterosexual romance narrative Moore describes in her article is such an ingrained part of our understanding of literary love affairs that critics often overlook the historical circumstances of its construction, the insertion of birth control discourse into literary narratives has been largely invisible to readers and scholars. Twentieth-century historians of sexuality, including Michel Foucault, Jeffrey Weeks, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Lillian Faderman, have explored eroticism in terms of various objects and elements of sexual attraction, but have not fully examined the effects on women’s and men’s experiences of sex of reproductive concerns like conception and contraception, the physical acts involved in using reproductive technologies, the variety of decisions surrounding fertility control, and the social, economic, and familial pressures on those decisions. By using the lens of birth control politics to examine Gilman’s, Larsen’s, O’Brien’s, and Woolf’s representations of sexuality and motherhood, I hope I have offered a way to reintegrate the complexities of fertility control into our study of literary representations of the sexual and the erotic.

Beyond the suggestion that sexuality studies take into account the role of reproductive technologies in representations of sexuality across literary movements and genres, this project aims to deepen our understanding of one moment the history of sexuality when such technologies took on new prominence. The rhetoric of the English and American birth control movement of the 1910s and 1920s put into public discourse one particular version of the association between fertility and sexuality, in positing

contraception as essential to a healthy, satisfying, and socially productive (hetero)sexual and reproductive life. The pervasiveness of this perspective can be seen in birth control advocates' concern for the "tremendous and far-reaching effects of marriage on the woman's whole organism" (Stopes *Married Love* 81), in their insistence that "through harmonious sex relationships a deeper spiritual unity is reached than can possibly be derived from continence in or out of marriage" (Ellis, BCR 1.4, 4), in claims such as "A woman whose thoughts are pure and noble and whose life is devoted to the uplift of humanity would, by the law of attraction, draw to her a child with similar inclinations" (BCR 1.5, 6). This version of the integration of fertility into understandings of sexuality arises out of the material and ideological circumstances of birth control advocacy, and is tied not only to a particular enactment of a male-female sexual relationship, but also to exclusions of other understandings of sexuality and reproduction borne out of existing class, race, and gender hierarchies.

Examining the possibilities and limitations of birth control rhetoric, Capo has suggested,

Birth control enabled the development of the contraceptive text, interrupting the generic plots of fiction that tend to repeat marriage and motherhood as the most plausible roles for women. The failure of these texts to fulfill the true potential of reenvisioning female life-narratives indicates the degree to which the potential of contraception has been and still is limited by ideologies of gendered power. (189)

Capo's point that the advent of widely available birth control in the twentieth century has led to neither a broad social revision of women's real-life roles nor wholly new literary

representations of women that eschew marriage and motherhood as goals is well-taken. However, her sense that birth control rhetoric somehow “failed” by not generating new canonical narratives for women elides the fact that the movement, despite Sanger’s early “red and flaming” writing in *The Woman Rebel*, often resisted the redistribution of power by reinforcing racial and class hierarchies, reinscribing traditional marriage narratives into a “smaller, fitter families” model, and actively denying the legitimacy of same sex or queer romantic and sexual relations. Thus, birth control was not so much “limited by the ideologies of gendered power” as generative of new ideologies of power, which have been adapted and interpreted by literary authors in the era of Stopes and Sanger and since then.

By showing how woman writers from different backgrounds adopted and resisted the ideologies propagated by birth control rhetoric, this project reveals how the writers I discuss “reenvisioned female life narratives” themselves, taking into account in their work the politics of sexual pleasure, the presumed responsibilities of “fit motherhood,” and the limits and possibilities of women’s control over their fertility. Beginning with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s separatist Utopia Herland and ending with Virginia Woolf’s suggestion of a “Society of Outsiders” among professional and creative women, we can see that interwar writers saw women’s autonomy as central to the advancement of both reproductive and political freedom, in keeping with the woman-centered reproductive agency upon which birth control advocates insisted. We can also see the influence of birth control arguments in Nella Larsen’s and Woolf’s shared association of larger families with degenerating health for both mothers and children—Larsen for Helga Crane

and her “less healthy and less loved” daughter, Woolf for the Victorian mothers of ten children depicted in *Three Guineas*. Larsen also shares with Kate O’Brien as well as with birth control advocates the tragic image of the over-fertile mother, who recognizes the danger of repeated childbirth but not how to end the reproductive cycle claiming her health and life.

We also, however, can see connections between these authors that emphasize the challenges their narratives posed to birth control politics and ideologies. O’Brien’s depiction of Eddy Considine’s life in London and Woolf’s portrayal of Clarissa Dalloway’s fascination with Sally Seton appropriate the “flowery,” spiritualized descriptions of sex common to birth control discourse representations of fulfilled heterosexual relationships to celebrate homosexual attraction, undermining Stopes’s explicit devaluing of same sex love affairs. Gilman, conversely, denies sexuality as important to human experience, resisting the “freedom” offered by birth control advocates in favor of limiting sexual contact to its reproductive function; Larsen also questions the value of the birth control movement’s ideal of women’s sexual freedom by demonstrating its limits in a racist society through Helga’s anxiety about being perceived as overly sexualized. Finally, both Larsen and O’Brien reveal and undermine the totalizing power of the eugenics discourse often used by birth control advocates by placing pro-eugenics claims in the mouths of the sexist, patriarchal characters James Vayle and John Aloysius Hennessey, characters who represent stagnation rather than progress in their respective narratives. Though nearly all of the texts I examine in this dissertation contain marriage plots (*Three Guineas* is the exception in being the only non-

narrative text analyzed here), none of the women's narratives depicted therein is entirely conventional or straightforward, and each author challenges what we might think of as "typical" women's roles through her insertion of birth control discourse themes and her simultaneous undermining of the received values of that discourse. Gilman, Larsen, O'Brien, and Woolf depict the changing nature of "*the erotic*" not through overturning traditional narratives associated with women but by shifting those narratives to confront and account for the problems of uncontrolled fertility, the implications of state or medical interference in women's reproductive lives, and the promise of pleasure itself as an end goal of sex.

Though an analysis of these four authors' uses and adaptations of birth control discourse could easily emphasize the similarities among their narratives, which persist despite the temporal and spatial differences of their publications and settings, one of the benefits of the transatlantic and trans-cultural approach I have taken in this dissertation is to highlight the ways in which these writers' different nationalities and ethnicities affect their reception and adoption of this discourse. A comparison of Ellador's anxiety about the increasingly heterogenous population in the United States and Helga Crane's preoccupation with the ongoing practice of lynching reveals the disturbing power differentials between white and Black Americans' experiences and perceptions of population engineering. In addition, though both Larsen and Woolf critically examine the ideology of positive eugenics and both eventually insist on women's autonomy in their reproductive decisions, Larsen's depiction of over-fertile Helga is both more dire and more attuned to differences in race and social class than Woolf's concern for over-fertile

Victorian mothers, exemplifying the sharp difference between Larsen's depiction of middle-class African-Americans in Harlem and Woolf's of middle-class white Londoners.

The different pressures on people of similar financial but different cultural backgrounds can also be seen in the comparison of O'Brien's portrayals of the Considines' large families with Woolf's depictions of the Dalloways' peers with "five sons at Eton"; while the English families' children appear to be straightforward contributions to their parents' social status and the supposedly declining English race, the large families of Irish Catholics in *Without My Cloak* not only represent a loss of control over women's health and happiness, but lead to the financial problems the Considines repeatedly encounter in the text. Catholicism also plays into the difference between Woolf's and O'Brien's depictions of unsatisfied wives: while Clarissa Dalloway can salvage pleasure in her less-than-perfect marriage by maintaining her privacy and her complex erotic sensitivity, Caroline Considine must rebel actively against her husband's sexual advances, and only gain a measure of control over her body after she has satisfied family and religious tradition by having six children. Gilman's Ellador attains an even greater measure of autonomy in her sex life than Clarissa; she cheerfully avoids sex with her husband for more than a year, secure in the knowledge that she can both attain "utter exaltation" and conceive a child without his assistance. In other words, though these post-birth control movement writers all characterize the erotic as requiring women's control over reproduction, entailing sexual pleasure for its own sake, and requiring some distance from "middle-class" social mores, their understandings and depictions of the possibilities

for achieving “the erotic” are circumscribed by their social and cultural milieus’ varying abilities to empower women and mothers, value children, and provide physical and economic security for families.

To return to Kenneth Burke’s sociological approach and the question of what modes of living the authors I discuss in this dissertation open up for their characters and their readers, I want to briefly note the possibilities for academic inquiry that this dissertation enables by making visible the interactions between birth control rhetoric and the texts examined here. By acknowledging the ways in which birth control rhetoric shifted paradigms of sexual pleasure and marital/familial fulfillment, we can also see how texts from the interwar era engaged with birth control debates even as they appeared to be focused on other issues, including war, overpopulation, racial politics, education, feminism or even seemingly traditional domestic narratives. Examining the pervasive presence of questions about reproduction and fertility control in interwar texts may add nuance to our view of their authors’ representations of nationalism and race, as well as of women’s experiences with sex, marriage, and motherhood. Acknowledging birth control as an ideological perspective whose depictions extend beyond explicit representations of condoms, diaphragms, and pills also opens up possibilities for reading contraceptive discourse in texts from throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which saw the growth of both widespread use of contraceptives and extensive debate over the ethical and medical limits of reproductive technologies.

Continued research into the history of such debates and their effects on the spectrum of real women’s experiences as well as on the narratives women construct

about reproduction, fertility, and contraception can enable a broader understanding of their stakes in terms of feminism, racial politics, medical ethics, and the history of sexuality. Some directions for such research might include broadening the time period for analysis of ways that birth control discourse infiltrated literature and other creative texts. Some examples of recent texts that continue to tap into the rhetoric of the birth control movement as I've discussed it in this dissertation include Mike Lee's 2004 film *Vera Drake*, Mike Judge's 2007 film *Idiocracy*, and the ongoing blog *A Little Pregnant*, started in 2003, which discusses the author's experiences with Assisted Reproduction Therapy. Analyses of such texts' uses of the images and affiliations I discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation, including those related to suffering mothers, eugenic family planning, and women's reproductive control, could provide a more nuanced narrative of the trajectory of birth control discourse into the early twenty-first century. Another fruitful area for study which this dissertation does not cover is the promulgation of "middle-brow" texts from the 1930s which actually address birth control in more direct, less politically-fraught terms than the texts included in this project, perhaps because of their status as "women's texts." Further research into references to fertility control in these texts, including for example Jessie Fauset's 1931 *Chinaberry Tree*, Una Troy's 1936 *Mount Prospect* and Rosamund Lehmann's 1936 *The Weather in These Streets* could provide insight into the different manifestations of birth control discourse in texts of different genres or audiences, as well as give a broader context for women's renegotiation of ideas of sexuality in the post-birth control era.

Ideally, any research into ways that creative texts define, contextualize, and challenge the ideologies surrounding fertility control will take an intersectional approach, seeking to understand the power structures generated by birth control discourse as well as the differences between its ideal and actual interventions in women's lives. This dissertation is only one entry point into the project of mapping the complexities of literary representations of human sexuality, which necessarily include not only representations of erotic desire, but also of the personal, social, financial, reproductive, gendered, racialized forces that make up our changing material experience of "*the erotic*."

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